

Murder Online

by Seimaru Amagi

Prologue

A peaceful morning in late summer.

A well-built young man with close-cropped hair turned into a side street and entered a coffee shop.

The aroma of roasting coffee beans filled the room. The young man gave a quick glance around before sitting at a table next to a large window. He wanted to be able to see outside. Only half the eight tables were occupied. He was the fifth customer.

As the waiter came to take his order, the young man looked around again. There was a youth with the air of a college senior in the job-hunting season hurriedly eating his toast; a man in his seventies reading the morning paper; two women in their thirties with heavy makeup chattering non-stop, probably on their way home after taking their children to kindergarten.

The young man had arranged to meet a teenage girl here. She had called him last night, her voice quivering, and had threatened to commit suicide. He didn't know her and thought it was some sort of prank at first. When he realized she was serious, he tried desperately to talk her out of it.

The girl said she wanted to meet him, and told him to be at this coffee shop at 8:30 the following morning. Then she'd hung up.

So here he was on the outskirts of town.

I doubt she'll come, he thought, as he took a sip of hot coffee. Maybe it was a joke, or maybe I managed to coax her out of it. If she comes, I'll do everything I can to stop her.

The young man had his own reasons for wanting to help the girl. He wanted to rid himself of the guilt he had been feeling for the past few months.

Six months before, he had been a teacher at private high school in Tokyo. He really cared about his job and his students, with the result that he was sometimes too strict. But that was his way. He did not want to be like some colleagues of his who would do anything to avoid a confrontation.

One day, a student of his was caught by police in an act of prostitution. He went to the police station himself to bring her back to school. When she sulkily protested that she was not harming anybody, he had slapped her in front of all the other students.

The girl collapsed to the floor, weeping. That evening she fell into a coma, and she died three days later. The teacher learned she had a chronic heart disease and, according to the autopsy, had died of a brain haemorrhage. There was no suggestion of a connection between her death and the slapping she had received.

The teacher, however, was devastated. He could feel the accusing looks of the parents and students. Some tabloids hinted at a scandal, but the school managed to hush it up. This only made the teacher feel worse. He resigned, but found it impossible to get another job. Now he seldom left home, drowning his sorrows in drink every night until the previous night, when he had received the call from a teenage girl. He decided he had to try and help, and so begin life anew.

He looked at his watch. It was 8:33 A.M. Outside the coffee shop, the waiter was scrubbing some graffiti off the side-walk. The young man who had been eating toast was now talking in an old-fashioned English-style telephone kiosk right outside. He had a large envelope under his arm.

Next to the kiosk, beneath some trees, was a pile of garbage ready for collection. A rickety old bicycle was parked there, too. There was hardly any traffic at this hour.

Rrring!

The coffee shop owner picked up the phone. "Just a minute, please," he said, scanning the customers. Coming out from behind the counter, he approached the teacher. "Would you happen to be ----?"

The teacher nodded and took the cordless receiver. It was her.

"You really came! Thank you so much. I'm sorry, but I still can't get up the courage to meet you. But I'd like to tell you what's bothering me. Is it OK if I do this over the phone?"

She sounded desperate.

The teacher didn't know what to say. He wanted to help her, but it was difficult with the owner hovering around, looking annoyed that his phone was being used. Then the teacher noticed that the kiosk outside was free.

"I'll call you back. Where are you?"

She gave him the name and telephone number of a coffee shop.

"Wait there." He hung up, gulped down his coffee, paid, and ran out, just as the waiter who was cleaning the graffiti came back in.

As the teacher dashed into the kiosk he heard the crunch of broken glass under his feet. Someone had kicked a hole in the pane at the bottom of the kiosk.

He inserted his phone card and dial-ed. The girl answered almost immediately and, relieved at hearing his name, tearfully began relating her problems.

The teacher begged her not to kill herself. "If you are willing to die," he argued, "then you can do anything. Imagine you've died once and are now born again."

As his voice rose in pitch, it could be heard from outside the kiosk. The owner of the old bicycle looked at him suspiciously before he picked up his bike and rode off.

After twenty minutes, the girl was still not completely convinced. At that time the teacher noticed a strange smell seeping into the kiosk through the hole at the bottom. Disregarding it, he continued to reason with the girl.

Suddenly, he found it impossible to breathe. By the time he realized something was wrong, he was too weak to push open the door or cry for help. He sank to the floor. He tried to call to the girl on the phone for assistance, but no words came out. In any case, he heard the phone go dead. A numbness spread over his body and he passed out.

Police treated the death in the telephone kiosk as an accident. For formality's sake, an investigation was conducted at the factory of the manufacturer of a bleach found in that day's garbage, but that was all.

Certain tabloids, however, linked the death with the incident at the teacher's previous school, using headlines such as "GODS PASS JUDGMENT ON ABUSIVE TEACHER."

The summer ended. Autumn and winter
would soon be here.

Chapter 1

Seven Handle Names

"What a bloody awful start to the New Year," Inspector Isamu Kenmochi said, turning up the collar of his trench-coat.

A body had been discovered in a pond in this park. Five police cars had already arrived at the scene, their red lights lighting up the path. A group of local housewives had also gathered there.

"Glad you could make it, sir. You're from MPD, I presume?" a local officer said, running up to him.

"Inspector Kenmochi, Homicide, Metropolitan Police Department. What's the state of the victim?"

"Bad, sir. Care to look at her? We've only got the head, right arm, and part of the torso."

"Arrghh, I'm going to throw up all the rice cakes I just ate!" Kenmochi said with a grimace.

Experts in rubber gloves were taking photographs of a blackish lump on a plastic sheet, while the young detective in charge held a handkerchief to his mouth. Apparently, he was not used to the stench of decomposing bodies.

"A man out jogging with his dog found her. The dog was barking and the man looked at the pond and saw a human hand poking out of a plastic bag."

"She must have been killed and chopped up, then put into bags that were weighted down and

thrown off the bridge."

"Can you find out who she is?"

"Tough. The body is badly decomposed and there are no personal belongings."

"But if you have the head, surely you can match the teeth against dental records?" Kenmochi said with a sigh. "I guess this means no ski trip with Hajime and Miyuki," he added, sticking another cigarette in his mouth.

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"Hajime, look. Isn't this sweater cute!" cried Miyuki Nanase.

They were in a ski shop, and Miyuki was pointing to a white sweater on a mannequin. A long weekend lay ahead, and the shops in Kichijoji, the fashionable suburb of Tokyo, were packed. It was hard to recall the calm of the New Year vacation that had just passed.

Miyuki, finding a pile of similar sweaters, took one, placed it against her body, and posed.

"Hajime, does this suit me? They have it in your size, too. Why don't we hit the slopes in matching outfits: you in blue on white, me in red on white."

"OK, OK," Hajime Kindaichi responded, indifferent.

He didn't care about sweaters. All he could think about was a certain item he needed to buy at the pharmacy before the next morning. He had been just about to buy it when Miyuki called and forced him to go shopping with her.

"Hajime! You're not paying any attention. I'm trying to get us clothes for this ski trip so I need your help."

The next morning Hajime and Miyuki were leaving for a two-night, three-day ski trip. They had been invited to stay at a pension run by Kenmochi's younger brother.

This trip was Kenmochi's way of thanking them. The three had met on an island off the Izu Peninsula where a series of murders had taken place. It was Hajime, grandson of the famous detective, who had actually solved the case, and he had also helped Kenmochi on several later cases.

"I am looking, Miyuki. It looks great!"

"You really think so?"

"Of Course."

"Then, you buy one, too, and...Oh wait, they have red ones as well. Do you mind if I try one on?"

"Go ahead. Hey, I bet this yellow would look great, too. And this one and this one."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Why don't you try them all on?"

"All right. You don't mind waiting?"

"No problem. Take your time."

"Thanks!"

As soon as Miyuki had vanished into the dressing room, Hajime dashed out and into the nearest pharmacy.

The condoms ranged in price from ¥1,000 to ¥4,000, depending on their thickness. He sighed. The thinner ones are best, but he didn't feel like paying out ¥4,000. But this would be the first time, so he wanted the best...

"Hajime, what are you doing here?"

He saw his mother standing in line at the cash register.

"M-Mom!"

"What are you doing, skulking around the pharmacy like this?" "Mom, I think I've caught a cold. Arghh, arggh..." Hajime coughed. "I'm going skiing tomorrow, so I thought I'd better get some cold medicine. Arghh..." he coughed again.

"Oh, that. Inspector Kenmochi called and said he won't be able to come tomorrow."

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"He said something about body parts being found in a pond in a park, so he can't take time off. Hajime, where are you going?"

But Hajime had already rushed out of the pharmacy.

"But I've bought all these clothes!" wailed Miyuki, holding a big paper bag.

"I'm going to phone him. You have his mobile phone number, right?" Hajime asked, searching frantically for a pay phone.

Miyuki pulled out her address book. Meanwhile Hajime had found a phone and was ready to dial. "Miyuki, hurry up!"

"Here it is...030..."

Hajime soon heard Kenmochi's earthy baritone. "Inspector Kenmochi speaking."

"What do you mean you can't come?" Hajime demanded.

"Sorry, very sorry. Some loony hacked a woman to pieces. No holiday for us champions of justice over the long weekend, I'm afraid."

"But you invited us! You mean it's cancelled?"

"Calm down. You two go on your own, OK? Anything wrong with that?"

"Well, if that means you'll be joining us later..." Hajime glanced at Miyuki.

"If I can, I will."

"I see. Then we'll get a head start. Right," Hajime said in an unnecessarily loud voice and, looking at Miyuki, hung up.

"So what are we doing?" Miyuki asked.

Hajime grinned. "Phew! He gave me a fright. He said that he'd be delayed but he'd probably make it."

"Then we are going skiing, after all."

"We are!"

"I'm so looking forward to it!"

"So am I!" Hajime said, with an entirely different meaning.

Traffic had been heavy coming up from Tokyo, so the bus Hajime and Miyuki took did not arrive at the ski resort until nearly 4 P.M. It was too late to ski that day, so they spent their time playing with Miyoko and Tomoko, the seven-year old twins of Yoshio, Inspector Kenmochi's brother, at the Pension Juhyo.

"Miyuki seems to be enjoying herself, Hajime observed. I hope this doesn't mean we're going to be baby-sitting day and-night. Then it'll be even harder to try out that certain item he had bought from a vending machine the previous night. He had gone a whole kilometre on his bicycle to get it!

Anyway, thought Hajime irritably, what is this so-called pension? It's nothing more than a simple

hostel with tatami-mat rooms and stew dinners.

He had been looking forward to something cuter, like a fairytale sugar-and-spice house with a red roof. There, in front of a fireplace, he and Miyuki would catch each other's eye and...

In spite of the gloomy forecast of three days of heavy snow in Nagano Prefecture, the next morning they woke up to brilliant weather.

Hajime, however, was in a bad mood. He had spent the night in the same room as Miyuki. Plus four children.

Unable to fall asleep, he had racked his brains for a plan. A map of the area was hanging on the wall in the living room. A few hundred meters off the main ski course, Hajime saw, was a small hut, which a note said served as an emergency refuge between Azamino Highland Resort and neighbouring Tengudaira Resort.

I could use this, he thought gleefully. The route was off-limits in January and February, when the snow was heavy, but who cared?

He'd persuade Miyuki to take this route to go to the neighbouring resort, then pretend to sprain his ankle when they got near the hut. There must be a stove and some blankets and other emergency supplies in it. If not, they could always return to the main ski course a couple of hundred meters away.

He could see it clearly:

"Hajime, are you OK? Miyuki would ask.

"I'll live, but 'm really cold."

"Oh no, Hajime, you probably have a fever.

I'll undress and warm you up."

At breakfast the next morning, Hajime told Mrs. Kenmochi not in front of Miyuki, of course that a friend worked part-time at the neighbouring resort and they would be spending the night there.

"Hajime, are you ready?" Miyuki called out.

She looked unusually grown-up in her new skiwear.

The jacket was bright red with an orange tint. It was cut in the latest fashion, reaching just below the buttocks. "Well, what do you think?" Miyuki posed for him.

Her headband matched her jacket. Her long hair swirled softly when she turned.

"You look great," Hajime said.

"I'm glad I listened to you and bought this jacket," said Miyuki.

Ever since they had held hands on the way to kindergarten, Miyuki had been straightforward when it came to expressing her emotions. Did that mean, Hajime wondered, that that was the extent of her affection for him? Just a sisterly affection. No, he told himself.

"Come on, let's get to the slopes!" Miyuki said, tugging his arm.

I gaze at the snow spreading into the distant horizon. The branches here and there seem like the bones of some animal that, exhausted, has relinquished its claim to life.

The snowscape is like the desert. Here we seem to be standing at the end of Time. There is no sign of life. Only an eternal silence reigns.

What a perfect setting. Nothing would be a better graveyard for those scoundrels! In an hour, the clock will be striking 5 PM. At that moment this mountain lodge, now as silent as a tomb, will resound with human voices. But not for long.

My murder weapons are laid out on the table. A strong rope. Chemicals sealed in a plastic bag. Capsules. Powdered roots of poisonous herbs. They cannot escape. No matter where they hide, no matter how securely they lock their doors, I, who go by the computer handle name of Trojan. Horse, will get them.

I return the murder weapons to my backpack and look at the clock again. Another fifty minutes. With the arrival of the first ones, the game will begin. Yes, this is a game with seven characters, a game called the "online Lodge Murders." And it is I, Trojan Horse, who will play the role of the Grim Reaper.

I am a computer virus programmed to frighten these characters and delete them from the game. Only forty minutes now.

The online Lodge members pulled party crackers and laughed as colored streamers floated in the air.

"To our first face-to-face meeting. Cheers!"

It was Sojo who proposed the toast.

"Cheers!" said the other four, raising their glasses and clinking them.

Agatha took a sip and asked, "Are you sure the other two won't be offended if we start the party without them?"

"Agatha, are you sure it's all right to be drinking alcohol when you're only a high school student?" said Watson.

Sid made a vulgar sound and ran his hand through his spiky hair. "You're such a square, Doc," he said, and emptied his wine in one gulp.

"Isn't this amazing?" said Patricia. "At last we all meet for the first time, but it doesn't feel that way." She was already on her second glass of wine.

"Of course," said Sojo. "After all, we've known each other online for over a year. And a lot has happened in that time."

For a moment, everyone looked tense, but in no time chatter and laughter returned to the well-heated lounge. It would continue that way as long as the online Lodge members abided by one rule: not to reveal their true identities or try to learn the real identities of the others. They would use their handle names only.

Sojo claimed to work for a top-ranked trading company; Agatha was a student at a prestigious girls' school; Watson said he was a doctor; Sid played for a punk rock band while doing other free-lance work; Patricia was a girls' comic artist.

"It must have been hard, finding a place like this," Sid remarked. "There's not a single pension for miles. I had to come by bus to the resort, then find a taxi with four-wheel drive that could bring me here, and that took at least forty minutes."

"But isn't this the perfect place for our get-together?" Patricia said. She was stroking a teddy bear that was on her lap. "A snowbound mountain lodge! I feel as if I've stepped into another world where anything could happen. We're so happy, aren't we, Yuta? Real log cabins! And the main lodge is so new and clean."

She was prattling away to the bear, her nose pushed against its nose.

"You know the Azamino Highland Resort? Well, the Silver-wood Lodge is situated on the opposite slope of the mountain from there," Sojo said. "At one point, they were planning to expand the resort, which is why they built this lodge. The ski runs were going to come up here, but with the collapse of the bubble economy, that plan was shelved. People come here in summer, but in winter it's too remote because it's more than a thirty-minute drive to the ski resort. And there's nothing else around here. Now they rent out these cottages, but they don't get too many customers." "What time did the other two say they were coming?" Sid asked grumpily.

"They'll be a while yet," Watson said. "Agatha, I'm sure you're dying to meet Ranpo."

"Ill say! Yesterday they were talking on the computer for ever. What a pair of fucking lovebirds!" Sid said, making a rude gesture, this time in Agatha's direction.

"For heaven's sake, Sid, stop it! We're having a good time. I rather like the idea of love online very futuristic! Like a comic book! Go for it, Agatha!"

Patricia waved Yuta's arm in encouragement.

"Oh, it's not like that at all!" Agatha said.

"No use denying it. Everyone knows," Patricia said, poking Agatha in the ribs.

Agatha let out a squeal and sank back in the sofa. Her short skirt hiked up to reveal white thighs. All the men looked at her.

"That son-of-a-bitch Ranpo! He's got himself a good deal!" Sid said.

"Right! If I'd known Agatha was such a dish I would have volunteered for the part myself!" Watson said. His eyes, feasting on Agatha, narrowed behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

Patricia went up to the men and clapped loudly. "Hey, what about Spenser? Poor thing, we've totally forgotten about him."

Just then the door bell rang.

"Talk of the devil, that must be him! He said he'd be late, but maybe he was able to make it on time."

Patricia sprang up and, still carrying Yuta, went to the door.

Thump! Thump!

The visitor was no longer ringing the bell but banging on the door. "Open up, open up," a voice shouted.

"OK, I'm coming," Patricia said.

She unlocked the door.

"Eeek!" she cried and leaped out of the way as a figure tumbled in.

He was dressed in a beige ski suit and was covered in snow. Behind him stood a young girl with long hair in a reddish-orange ski jacket.

"Excuse me! We were skiing and got lost. Please tell me where we are."

The man removed his goggles to reveal a boy of high school age.

"You're lost? You mean you're not Spenser or Ranpo?"

Patricia stared at the boy, who stared back.

"No, I'm Hajime Kindaichi and this is my friend, Miyuki Nanase."

The two looked at each other, then smiled at Patricia in a friendly way.

Chapter 2

Uninvited Guests

"Phew, that was lucky! We were skiing back to the resort and must have taken a wrong turn! It got darker and darker and the snow was piling up! I thought we were finished!" Hajime said, drying his hair with a towel.

He'd intended to stop at the refuge hut but couldn't find it. Then, when he decided to go back, he couldn't find the way.

He panicked and skied off in any direction. His plan of "getting lost by accident" was turning into a reality. No houses were in sight, and he had been about to despair when he spotted a cluster of cottages around a large cabin the main lodge.

"I told you not to go down that course, but you wouldn't listen!" remonstrated Miyuki.

"OK, OK. All's well that ends well," said Hajime with a laugh. He knew that Miyuki was more relieved than angry they could have frozen to death.

"So you came here from the course on Shikagoe Ridge?" asked the large man sitting in the biggest sofa. He acted as if he were in charge.

"Yes"

"You're lucky. Even in spring, people get hurt on that slope. Wait a moment, skiing's not allowed there in this weather."

Hajime gave a forced laugh. "Yes, well, both Miyuki and I are lucky and..."

He felt Miyuki glaring at him.

"Miyuki, we'd better introduce ourselves. This is Miyuki Nanase and I'm Hajime Kindaichi. We're classmates."

"Kindaichi? You mean instead of Ranpo, Japan's answer to Edgar Allen Poe, we have Kindaichi? This is too much!" The spiky-haired youth in the black leather jacket gave a loud laugh that annoyed Hajime.

"His manners are terrible," the long-haired girl holding a teddy bear said by way of apology.

Her voice was husky. Her huge eyes were like dark, gleaming pools, and her pouting lips were covered in pearl lipstick. The way she wiggled her eyebrows was rather suggestive.

"Yes, he's very rude," she continued. She picked up something she had been sitting on, it looked like a silver balloon, put it to her mouth, and inhaled. Then, taking the teddy bear's arm, she bopped the punk's head.

"Tell him you're sorry, Sid," she said in a croaky voice. What she had inhaled had transformed her voice.

"How do you do that?" Sid asked.

"It's called Frog Voice." You inject a special spray into the balloon, and when you inhale your voice changes. Standard party entertainment."

Everyone laughed.

"Lay off! I'm into punk rock. To me, a party means sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll."

Sid made another vulgar gesture. However, Hajime thought he glimpsed a sensitivity that seemed at odds with the boy's appearance and behaviour.

"Anyway, he's sorry, Hajime. It's so rude to laugh at someone's name," Patricia said in her normal voice.

"I don't mind except that he seemed to be laughing at my grandfather, too," Hajime said.

"Grandfather?"

"Hajime's grandfather is the famous detective, Kosuke Kindaichi," Miyuki explained. "Isn't that so, Hajime?" She was trying to mollify him.

"Yes," Hajime said, still looking annoyed.

"Really?" the large man in the sofa asked.

At first, Hajime thought he was a man with a lot of self-confidence, but the nervous way he kept glancing around him suggested that he was far from confident.

"Yes, it's true," Hajime said.

"It's an amazing coincidence that you should show up here! We belong to the online Lodge, a group of crime and suspense fiction fans. We all have our pet genres and have read everything in our category: murder mystery, hard-boiled..."

"I'm Sojo at least that's how I'm known here. Nice to meet you, Hajime."

Sojo bowed slightly.

"Nice to meet you, Sojo," Hajime said, thinking how weird their names were.

As if reading his thoughts, Patricia explained.

"Sojo, Sid, Patricia", these aren't our real names. Sojo, for example, gets his name from a character in the Bishop Murder Case by S. S. Van Dine. I'm Patricia, the first name of a famous American detective writer. Four eyes over there who hasn't said a word is Watson."

She used her teddy bear's arm to point to a stocky individual.

"A doctor and a die-hard Sherlock Holmes fan. So he took the name of Holmes's right-hand man Dr Watson: Right??"

"Something like that," Watson said, pushing his glasses up his nose with his finger.

"But why don't you use your real names?" Hajime asked.

"You know about communication by computers?" Patricia asked in reply.

"Yes, I've heard of it," Hajime said, looking at Miyuki for help.

"You connect your computer to a phone line and chat with others online. I've done it a little, too," Miyuki said.

"When?" Hajime asked.

"My dad recently bought a Mac, and he lets me play around with it."

"So, Miyuki, you must know that you can talk to people on real time just like you can over the phone. Have online chats and so on. Yuta, be a good boy for a moment."

Patricia put her teddy bear on the sofa and went to the table. She opened the lid of her lap top.

"Watch."

She turned on the computer and opened a document. "This is the conversation the seven of us had yesterday. See? You chat just as if you're in the same room together"

"Wow!"

"Your names Patricia, Sid are here."

"Yes. These are our handles."like the pen names authors use."

"Looks like fun," Hajime said, peering at the screen.

"Aren't you worried that other computer users will eavesdrop?" Miyuki asked.

"No. With a scrambling program, two people can chat in private. So can a group. Only people with the password have access. Actually, this is how we created the online Lodge."

"Wow! A sign of the times," Hajime sighed, folding his arms.

"He's a bit young to be talking like that, isn't he, Agatha?" Sojo asked a girl who had brought in some coffee.

"He is."

"This is Agatha, after Agatha Christie. She's the youngest in her second year of high school. About the same age as you, perhaps? You should learn to handle a computer, young man, otherwise you'll be left behind."

"I was totally overwhelmed in the beginning," Agatha said with a friendly smile, passing the coffee cups. "I'm sure you two will be hooked once you find out how much fun it is."

"Not me! I'm a total dunce when it comes to these things," Hajime said, with a brisk shake of his head. He was falling for Agatha's pretty smile.

"Come on, you're the grandson of a famous detective," Agatha said, putting her hand to her

mouth as if to stifle a laugh.

Agatha's cute gestures seemed a little forced. Hajime thought that behind those airs hid a stronger woman the type men liked but women hated.

Miyuki was looking at them both rather coldly.

"I'm sure he means it, Agatha," she said. "He's not the academic type. He'd only use a computer to play games."

"Oh, shush," Hajime said.

Sid had been studying them. He suddenly peered at Hajime and said, "Friendly, aren't you! I'm jealous. Are you going together? Have you scored with her yet?"

"I-It's nothing like that!" Miyuki spluttered, blushing.

"For God's sake, Sid, stop! These people are our guests," Patricia said. "I'm so sorry, Miyuki and Hajime. Sid has absolutely no manners. Sid, you really are exactly the way you come across online. I thought you might surprise me by being more serious when I met you in person."

"So I've disappointed you, Pat? I'm not disappointed you're much prettier than I thought you'd be. Why don't we hit the sack together sometime? I'm much warmer than your teddy bear."

"Thanks but no thanks: My Yuta is far cuter. Still, it's funny..."

"What is?"

"You're exactly the same as you are online. In fact, everybody is. It's as if we've all stepped out of our computers into a world of virtual reality." Patricia stroked her teddy bear's head and looked around dreamily. "I feel as if the Silver-wood Lodge is the setting for a computer game. We are just characters in the game. You must all feel it. I think I have an idea for a story."

"There speaks the girls' comic artist," Sid remarked.

"Hmm, Patricia may be right," Sojo said. "I feel like a character in a computer game, too. It feels great no distractions from the outside world."

He leaned back on the sofa and puffed at his cigarette.

Watson and Agatha were gazing blankly into space, as if savoring this same weird happiness.

"Can I ask you something?" Hajime broke the silence. ~

"Fire away," Sid said.

"Is today the first time you've all met in person?" The online Lodge members looked at one another. Finally Sojo spoke.

"That's right. We've been acquainted online for over a year, though. This is a party to celebrate the first off-line meeting of the group."

"Off-line?"

"Off-line. When we use computers to talk, we are online. Getting together in person is offline. Understand?"

"Yes. May I ask another question?" Hajime said, scratching his head.

"Go ahead."

"So none of you know any of your real names?"

Sojo looked upset for a moment but recovered quickly. "Right," he said. "We don't know anyone's real name or anything else about one another. All we know is what each of us has volunteered online."

"Isn't that kind of spooky?"

"Sometimes it's more fun when you don't know. Promise that you won't ask people about their real identity."

"All right. Well, we'd better be going. I'd like to call a taxi. Can I use your phone?"

Hajime was beginning to feel unwelcome.

"You're leaving? We were just thinking the more the merrier, weren't we, Yuta? Why don't you stay the night?" Patricia suggested, stroking her teddy bear.

"No, we really should be going, eh, Miyuki?"

"Yes, we should."

While Hajime and Miyuki were looking at each other, trying to decide what to do, Sojo broke in. "Patricia's right. Why don't you stay the night? We'd love to hear about your grandfather. You saw those cottages outside? There're still some empty ones. It's already past seven. A taxi would take an hour to get here. Just call your lodgings and tell them you're staying here?"

"What do you think, Miyuki?"

"What do you think, Hajime?"

"Shall we stay?"

"Maybe we should."

"We accept then. We'll stay until tomorrow morning."

Hajime and Miyuki gave a polite bow in thanks.

That evening the schedule was for everyone to play computer games until 9 PM., then return to their respective cottages and chat about the day online. Hajime couldn't help thinking it was odd; if they were together in person, why should they need to talk online?

However, he was enjoying the party in the lounge with the big roaring fire. He was also looking forward to spending the night in a cottage. Much fancier than the pension. A much better place to seduce Miyuki, he thought, feeling vague stirrings in his loins.

"What are you grinning about, Hajime? Your turn." Patricia's teddy bear tapped him on the shoulder. The woman spoke in an absurdly highpitched nasal voice, probably meant to be that of the bear.

Patricia claimed to be nineteen years old, but Hajime didn't believe her. Probably two or three years older, he thought look at that makeup! He wondered if the teddy bear was part of her effort to appear younger.

"Lost again?" Agatha asked, slipping in next to him. They were playing a computer version of Parcheesi. "You move the arrow by moving the mouse. See? Then press here. It's the perfect game for beginners."

She's a pretty girl, he thought, as he watched her play. She, too, had lied about her age. He couldn't believe she was the same age as Miyuki and himself. Or maybe there are some very grown-up high schoolers.

What he found even harder to understand was why a pretty girl would choose to spend the holidays with computer pals in the middle of nowhere. "I'm thinking in stereotypes," he chided himself. "Not all computer whizzes are nerds! Some young TV stars even claim to be computer addicts!"

"You're quite a hit with the ladies, Kindaichi. Are you sure you want to leave your pretty friend sitting on the sidelines?"

Watson had been observing Hajime talking to Patricia and Agatha.

"Hey, Kindaichi, no use trying to get Agatha to bed," Sid said. "She's Ranpo's girl. He's supposed to show up later. 'Course, they haven't made out or even met. It was just love online."

"Sid, I think you misunderstand something. Hajime does tend to drool when he sees pretty girls, but he's not going to try to seduce someone he's just met. I know him very well and I can assure you of that," Miyuki said in an unusually loud voice.

Hajime turned to Miyuki, pleased.

"Isn't that so, Hajime?" Miyuki asked.

"Yes," Hajime said. "Now about Ranpo who's coming later and the other one""

"Spenser? The famous detective in Robert B. Parker's books."

"Yes, when is that ~Sponsor' coming?" Patricia asked.

"Spenser," Sojo emphasized irritably.

"Pun, pun!" Patricia cried.

The three girls burst out laughing, while the two men sighed.

Damn! I didn't expect two strangers.

I didn't want anyone but the six online Lodge members to see me. That's why I skied here instead of taking a taxi. I wanted to leave six bodies here and then vanish.

Now these two outsiders know what I look like. I must make some small changes to my plans. I must remember everywhere I touch so can wipe off my fingerprints later.

But since these two outsiders have seen me, I cannot disappear after finishing off the six. They would describe me to the police, who'd find me without much trouble.

It's very inconvenient that they know seven people were supposed to gather here.

Even if everything goes according to plan, if there are six bodies, the seventh person will most probably be the murder suspect.

And if I fail to kill all six? My fake alibi will come to light and I will be under suspicion.

It's good that Sojo became interested in that grandson of Kosuke Kindaichi and persuaded him and his girlfriend to stay. They will be part of my little drama now, and I won't be the only one left alive after the murders.

Of course, it's possible that they might have to be killed, too, but I prefer not to involve innocent people.

Ah, it's like a computer game. I have planned every step and am making sure each one is logical. That's my only chance. I do not know who any of these people are or what they do, so when the off-line party is over, I would never be able to find them again.

The game has begun. No turning back. Yes, a minor bug has been discovered in the program, but I can handle it.

Only two more characters to show up! Perfect! Meanwhile, I'm playing a silly computer game, using my handle, like the others, and nonchalantly acting my role.

When the clock struck nine, everyone, except Sid, dutifully stopped playing the game and started cleaning up. Sid was slouched on the sofa, sipping beer, but nobody complained.

"About tonight," Agatha said to Hajime and Miyuki, clearing away the leftover rice crackers and potato chips, "Do you two mind sharing a ecottage? There are quite a few empty cottages but..."

"No, that'll be fine, won't it, Miyuki?" Hajime replied eagerly.

"I suppose so. Hajime, do wipe that sleazy look off your face? I hope you're not getting any ideas."

"What do you mean?" Hajime asked, defensive.

She's still a child, or she thinks of me as one, he thought.

Hajime forced himself to look serious. "Miyuki, we're being invited to stay here, free. We don't want to be rude and ask our hosts for two cottages. Right?"

"Right," Miyuki replied sulkily.

"Agreed then?" Agatha handed over a wooden tag with a key attached on a chain. The chain tinkled slightly.

"You're in Cottage No. 5. Here's a map." She handed over a plan of the compound. The cottages were numbered one to twelve, and some of them had a person's name written next to the number.

"Let's go back to our rooms and catch one another online," Sojo said, donning his ski jacket.

"Shouldn't someone stay behind and wait for Ranpo and Spenser?" Patricia asked.

Sid snickered. "Why bother? They got the schedule by e-mail, so why don't we just leave the door unlocked and a note."

Agatha raised her hand before speaking, like a student in class. "I'll stay and wait," she said.

"I know, you want to see Ranpo as soon as he gets here," said Watson with a mirthless laugh.

"So can we leave it to you, Agatha?" Patricia asked.

"I guess it's no use saying be a good girl when Ranpo gets here. Two lovers in a snowbound mountain lodge...Tee-hee, it's too much. Spenser is Ranpo's bosom buddy, so he'll make sure he doesn't get in the way. Ha-ha-ha!"

Sid made another of his vulgar gestures. He had put on his black sunglasses.

"Sid, please stop," Agatha said with a faraway look in her eyes.

Everyone began to prepare to leave for their cottages. As Hajime and Miyuki were collecting their things, Hajime tried to focus his thoughts on the online Lodge members.

"Sojo worked almost too hard to convince others that he was an executive at an international

trading company, a man of the world and the one in charge. He claimed to be twenty-four years old, but Hajime put him closer to twenty-one or twenty-two.

"Patricia, the woman with the teddy bear, claimed to be a girls' comic artist, whose work was published now and then. But when Miyuki asked her to draw something, she looked annoyed and refused. She seemed to have an ongoing feud with Sid.

"Agatha, Hajime had hoped, would be willing to divulge her real name and that of her school once she found out that Miyuki and he, like herself, were in the second year of high school. But she, too, was not forthcoming on her personal details, and Hajime doubted whether she really was still at school.

"Watson said he was a doctor, and something about the way he spoke seemed genuine to Hajime. He seemed to know the most about computers and appeared to have a crush on Agatha, even though she was supposedly in love with Ranpo. Watson gave his age as twenty-four, but Hajime had doubts about this as well.

"Sid said he was nineteen and played with a punk band, but Hajime felt he was different from the punk rockers in school who said very little and smiled even less. It was also odd that he never talked about music.

"The other two members had yet to show up. Sid had described them as "bosom buddies."

Hajime found it hard to believe that two people who had never met and only communicated online could have such a close relationship.

"Sorry to leave you here all by yourself, Agatha," Patricia said, waving from the lodge door.

"Good night," said Hajime and Miyuki.

Agatha waved to them and smiled.

Hajime, Miyuki, and the other members of the online Lodge stepped outside to find it snowing much harder. They had arrived only three hours earlier, but already their footprints were invisible.

"Snowing hard!" Sid said, pushing his sun-glasses down and looking up at the black sky.

Snowflakes, sparkling in the lodge lights, were dancing and fluttering. Hajime had the distinct but strange impression that it was snowing only at the Silver-wood Lodge. The wind, too, was getting stronger.

"If this continues, we'll be stuck here for a while," someone said.

Nobody answered. In front of them they could see the cottages, lit up by orange lights.

Kishi sat by the window in his spacious cottage for two. The exposed logs of the walls rose up to the ceiling, revealing the pitch of the roof.

He was typing in the dark, his computer connected to a phone line, just like the others.

How weird we must seem to outsiders like that Kindaichi boy, he thought with a smile. Glancing out the window, he noticed that the weather had gotten worse. He could see the lights in the other cottages as well as the brighter ones in the main lodge.

Ranpo and Spenser must have arrived by now. Or maybe Ranpo was alone with Agatha.

He turned his attention back to the screen. He so loved his handle, and he loved being called that name by the other online Lodge members.

It was very different from the way people treated him in real life. He still seethed when he recalled what his boss said a month ago, when he had asked for time off to take this trip.

"You have some nerve asking for a vacation! Ask when you deserve it!"

He only wanted his New Year vacation like everybody else, so why that humiliation?

Performance, performance, performance! That was all his boss talked about. Kishi was paid according to the number of products he sold, in other words, on a commission basis. Experienced colleagues told him that the surest way to success was to take pride in the products.

How could he take pride in some useless medical equipment?

His job was to trick customers often the elderly, housewives, or students into paying out between ¥150,000 and ¥1,200,000 for a "magnetic therapy bed." One tactic was to persuade them that they, too, could make money by joining the pyramid sales scheme.

Two years of such work had worn him out. In his first year, he had been driven by greed, and he had ranked among the top ten salesmen. His ready tongue made him quite a success with his customers.

However, things began to go downhill after a customer who was a student fell heavily into debt when he couldn't sell the "magnetic therapy beds" he had bought from Kishi. The student tried to throw himself off the third floor of Kishi's office building. Luckily, he only suffered two broken legs, but Kishi sank into a depression from which he never recovered.

These days, he was lucky if he could sell one bed a month. His salary was at the lowest possible level. His boss was rude to him every day, and it was getting worse all the time.

However, he no longer cared about the real world. Eight months ago he had discovered the world of computers, and he had come alive again. He had made friends with other fans of crime and suspense fiction.

Kishi loved it! "This is the life!" he typed online to the other members.

There's the taxi! I can see it from the attic here in the main lodge.

So you've arrived and the group is now complete.

I'm glad I did my homework and found out about this attic. It's perfect! Through the cracks in the floorboards I can see into the lounge below, although when the folding ladder is raised, from the lounge it's hard to notice there's an attic.

I turn off the light. I want to see and hear what's happening downstairs.

The girl is standing in front of the fireplace. She keeps looking at the clock, and I can even hear her sighs. Terrific! I'll be able to catch everything they say.

The doorbell rings. I look at my watch. 10:20 PM. The girl jumps up and goes to answer the door. I move, too, to stand right above the entrance. There are no cracks in the floorboards here, so I crouch down and put my ear to the floor.

"The door's not locked," the girl says nervously.

The door opens and I hear footsteps.

"Er...", a man says.

"You're Ranpo," the girl says quickly.

"Agatha?"

"Y-Yes, 'm Agatha. Hello."

"Wow! It's amazing to meet you at last!"

"Yes. I came here because I wanted to meet you."

"Same here. You're just as I expected, Agatha, so pretty."

My goodness, what a joke! Love! They haven't even told each other anything real about themselves yet. Love online is just a game! But these people consider everything a game. They evade their responsibilities in order to satisfy their pathetic needs. Unforgivable!

The two are sitting on the sofa now, very close together, chatting about nothing. Are they tickling each other? I hear giggling.

The girl has her left hand on the man's knee. The man's right arm is around her waist. Suddenly they stop talking and gaze into each other's eyes. They kiss. They are performing the rites of man and woman since the beginning of time.

How predictable! They'll be here two or three hours. Good, my plans are going smoothly.

I look at my watch. Already half an hour after midnight.

I crawl around in the dark and open the skylight. The blast of wind lets in the snow, as sharp as needles against my face. I can hear branches creaking. Shielding my eyes from the wind, I step out.

I shut the window and slowly descend the iron ladder. It must be more than 10 degrees below freezing, and I can feel the chill of the iron ladder through my thick ski gloves.

It is as if that same chill has entered my heart, destroying any kind of hesitation. I am ready to kill.

It's forty minutes after midnight. I jump down onto the snow and make my way to my destination, walking where my footprints will be less visible, although I needn't have worried. In this blizzard, any footprints will vanish in half an hour.

I stop in front of Cottage No. 2 and inch my way along the walls to peer in through the window.

There's Sojo, sitting in front of his computer.

It's getting hot in here, Kishi thought. He stared at the screen, at the four names chatting online:

Patricia, Watson, Sid, and Sojo. Yes, he was Sojo.

But he had not made any contribution to the exchanges in the past five minutes. Something was making him uneasy.

At this point he was having second thoughts. Perhaps, he wondered, it had been a bad idea for the online Lodge members to meet. Seeing them in person made that incident several months ago take on an uncomfortable reality.

Even the tone of their online conversation was beginning to change. He knew the others were feeling uncomfortable about this, too.

"Ridiculous," he said, but he still felt nervous.

"I've done nothing wrong," he declared.

Feeling a little better, he began to defend himself in his mind. Yes, a man had died that day. But he had just been unlucky or, as a magazine had put it, the gods had passed judgment on an evil man.

There was no proof that a crime had been committed, and even the police had treated the man's death as accidental.

As for himself, all he had done was find a place that fulfilled certain conditions.

The screen caught his attention again with a comment from Patricia: "What's the matter, Sojo? You've been very quiet."

Snap out of it, he told himself. You should be enjoying this happy get-together. Enjoy being someone you're not, enjoy being in this ideal world. Right now he was Sojo, graduate of a topnotch university working for a top-flight international trading company. He began typing his response to Patricia.

"Sorry," he wrote. "I started thinking about work. After this I must fly to New York to close a major deal involving computers. Hundreds of millions of yen at stake! I'm indispensable to the project, so I guess this will be my last vacation for a while."

Immediately his online friends sent him encouragement.

This is what he wanted. This camaraderie was intoxicating. Then he heard someone knocking at his door.

He looked at the time on the computer screen: 12:43 AM.

He typed in the following message:

"Someone's here. Might be Spenser. Just one moment, please."

Leaving his computer connected to the phone line, he got up to open the door.

"Oh, hello!" he said, smiling at his visitor. Then he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

Takuma's slender knife went through Sojo's heart. There was not much blood just a few splatters on Takuma's plastic coat.

Sojo took a few steps back and slumped to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. His face grew pale. The knife was stuck in his chest, and each time he breathed, a shower of blood spurted out.

Takuma slipped behind him. Sojo was near death, but he was desperately trying to communicate with his murderer, as if pleading for mercy.

The assassin kicked him. Sojo had no strength to plead, let alone fight back. The murderer crouched on one knee and shouted into Sojo's ear why he was being killed.

Sojo slowly shook his head, but Takuma could not tell whether he felt remorse or not.

Chapter 3

The Trojan Horse

"Hajime, let's go to bed," Miyuki said, yawning. They were playing cards. She put an ace of hearts on the table. The sweat suit she had borrowed from Agatha was a little tight, especially around the chest. Hajime, his eyes riveted on that area, was slow in responding.

"Hajime, the ace of hearts!"

"Eh...the ace?" Hajime said.

Somewhere along the way, Hajime thought, he had missed his chance. When they had come to the cottage, Miyuki had gone to take a bath first, and a long one at that. Hajime, pacing back and forth, had not been able to absorb the fact that Miyuki's naked body, with a bra size rumored to be the object of every male classmate's fantasies was on the other side of the bathroom door. After he,

too, had bathed, he suggested a game of cards. At that point his strategy was: Get her relaxed and in the mood.

Only he was so distracted by thinking what lay ahead that he kept losing.

Hajime sighed. Just then the phone rang and he picked it up.

"Hello?" His irritation at being disturbed so late was clear. "Hello? Who is it?" he repeated.

He heard a giggle. "Oops, sorry. Were you asleep?"

The voice was high and artificial. Hajime remembered Patricia's "Frog Voice" and guessed that this was what the person on the other end was using.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I suppose you can call me 'The Trojan Horse.'"

"The Trojan Horse?"

One of the online Lodge members must be playing a joke, Hajime thought.

"Think of it as my handle," the person said, with a laugh like a crow's caw.

"Oh, those handle names again! You're staying here, right?"

The Trojan Horse ignored the question and said, "There's a dead body in Cottage No. 2."

"What?" said Hajime, unable to take in the meaning at first.

"I'm saying that Sojo has been murdered."

"What do you mean?" Hajime asked brusquely, annoyed at the person's tone. "Please don't call in the middle of the night to play practical jokes."

"Either Watson or Ranpo killed him." The Trojan Horse laughed that high-pitched laugh again.

"Go and check, if you don't believe me. The cottage is splattered with Sojo's good-for-nothing: blood.", The Trojan Horse gave another laugh and hung up.

Hajime felt a chill run down his spine. He slammed down the receiver, picked it up again intending to phone the other cottages, then thought better of it, realizing what time it was.

"It's 2 AM. If this really is a joke, the others are not going to be happy at being woken up."

"What's the matter, Hajime?" Miyuki looked worried, both with the phone call at this hour and Hajime's reaction to it.

"Who was that, Hajime?" she asked.

"Some weirdo who goes by the name of Trojan Horse, claiming that Sojo's been murdered."

"What? It must be a joke. If you go to the cottage, I bet you'll find someone smeared with catsup pretending to be dead." Miyuki was laughing, but looking anxious at the same time.

"Probably. Let's go and check."

Hajime and Miyuki donned their ski jackets and stepped out into the blizzard.

They trudged through knee-deep snow to Sojo's cottage. The lights were still on.

"Looks like a prank after all," Hajime said, going to the window.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?"

He turned around to see Watson, with a serious expression on his face.

"Okh, it's you, Hajime," he said, apparently relieved.

"We got a weird phone call," Hajime said.

"Why are you here?"

"Same as you. I got a phone call telling me to come here. I think it's a joke, but someone by the name of Trojan Horse said Sojo had been killed by Ranpo."

"What?"

"H-Hajime, look!" Miyuki screamed.

Both Hajime and Miyuki leaned forward to look through the window.

On the reddish-brown carpet was a pool of blood, in the middle of which lay a large man in a bloodstained white shirt.

Sojo.

In the orangish light his cheeks seemed ruddy with health, but it was clear he was dead. Hajime recalled the Trojan Horse's cackle and knew it had been the laugh of the murderer.

"He's dead...Sojo's dead! Then that phone call was no hoax. We have to do something! We must call the police!" Watson cried.

"Wait," Hajime said, grabbing Watson's shoulder. "This is a murder and we are the ones who discovered the body. We must get a clear idea of the murder scene."

"Oh, stop playing detective! If we get involved, we might be murdered ourselves."

Watson trembled and prised Hajime's fingers off his shoulder.

"Listen," Hajime said. "We are going to walk around the cottage to see if we can notice anything. I want you to look for footprints. Even with this blizzard, there should be footprints if someone was here ten or twenty minutes ago. I also want to find out how long it takes for our footprints to disappear. It may help us pinpoint the time of the murder."

"Let's leave it to the police."

"The police aren't here. Even if we phone, it will take a while for them to get here. We have to do this, don't you understand?"

"I suppose so."

"Miyuki, if you notice anything, even if it seems unimportant, tell me."

"OK."

Hajime first looked around the entrance, but he could not see anything resembling footprints.

"Let's start then," he said.

Staying close to one another, the three began circling the cottage. The snowy surface around the cottage, lit by the orangish light, seemed as lifeless as a desert.

No footprints.

Hajime was trying to work out the time of the murder in this blizzard footprints would disappear in much less than an hour.

He looked at his watch. 2:20 A.M. They had arrived about ten minutes earlier.

He was still able to see their footprints. So the murderer had left the scene more than ten minutes ago. Unless he was still here!

They found themselves back at the cottage entrance.

"There were no footprints, were there?" Miyuki asked, looking at Hajime.

"No. Did you see any, Watson?"

"No."

"OK. Time for us to go into the cottage.", Hajime approached the door.

"I don't think you should do that," Watson said. "The murderer might still be inside. In fact, he probably is because there are no footprints to show he left."

Miyuki gave Hajime's hand a tug. "He's right. Let's call the police."

"No, no. If the murderer's inside, he'll escape while we're calling. Come on, there are three of us! If we're careful, we'll be all right!"

This time Hajime tugged Miyuki toward the door. It was slightly ajar, and a finger of light streamed out through the gap. The key was still in the keyhole, the wooden key holder preventing the door from shutting.

Hajime peered in. He could see no sign of life. The computer screen glowed on the table. The bathroom door was wide open. There was nobody inside.

Since there was nowhere else for the murderer to hide, he or she had evidently gone.

"It's OK. Let's go in," Hajime said giving the door a push.

"Hey!"

A man's voice came from behind them. The three young people gave a start and turned around.

A man, his mouth hidden under a red scarf, was standing in the blizzard.

Hajime gulped. Miyuki clung to him.

"Wh-Who are you?" Watson stammered.

The man undid his rather bulky hand-knitted muffler. His breath floated white in the cold air, like cigarette smoke. He was a good-looking young man with well-defined features.

"I'm Ranpo," he introduced himself. "And you?"

"Hajime Kindaichi. We ended up staying here due to some unforeseen events. Right, Miyuki?" He was relieved to hear the name Ranpo.

"Yes. Hello, I'm Miyuki Nanase."

She bowed her head in greeting.

Her friendly manner disarmed Ranpo. "Hello," he said with a smile. "I'm the one with the handle name Ranpo."

"I heard someone called Ranpo was coming."

"Wait, he's a murderer!" Watson cried. "The person on the phone told me that Ranpo killed Sojo."

"What are you talking about? Wait, are you saying that Sojo has been?" Ranpo looked defensive again.

"No use acting innocent. You did it, didn't you?", Watson indicated the cottage. Ranpo followed his glance and looked inside. "My goodness, what's this?" he cried.

"The person on the floor is Sojo. Someone killed him," Hajime said.

"Then that phone call wasn't a joke?"

"Phone call? You received a phone call, too?" Hajime asked.

Ranpo looked down, as though to calm himself. "You, too? I got a phone call from someone claiming to be the Trojan Horse."

He shook his head. "I thought it was a joke and hung up. But then the person called again, doing something so that the voice was different. I assumed that this persistence meant some entertainment was waiting for us here, so I came. I never thought what the Trojan Horse said could be true. Oh, God!"

He glanced at Sojo's body and let out a sigh.

"Liar! He did it, then he hid somewhere and is now pretending to have just arrived," Watson cried, cringing behind Hajime and Miyuki.

Ranpo frowned. "Who are you to be making such accusations?"

"I'm Watson. If you're really Ranpo, you should know!"

"Watson? Then you're the murderer!"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"The Trojan Horse said that Sojo was murdered by Watson," Ranpo continued, glaring at Watson.

"That's ridiculous!" Watson cried.

I wonder what the Trojan Horse is up to, Hajime thought, as he looked at the two glowering men. Come to think of it, when the Trojan Horse called us he said...

"What did he say to you?" Ranpo asked, as though reading his mind.

Hajime deliberately looked away from Watson and Ranpo. "The Trojan Horse changed his or her voice with that 'Frog Voice' toy."

"It was the same with my call."

"And mine."

"He said, 'Sojo is dead in Cottage No. 2. Either Watson or Ranpo did it.'"

4

Although Watson and Ranpo were accusing each other of being the murderer, to Hajime the answer seemed obvious: the Trojan Horse was the most likely suspect.

Why, however, had the Trojan Horse said three different things? Not just to be funny, Hajime knew. He was analysing the murder scene. The lights left on; the pool of blood on the carpet; Sojo's body with its half-open eyes; the two glowering men; the computer still switched on; the words on the screen...

Then Ranpo said, "It's no use us glaring at each other, Watson. The murderer has to be the person who phoned: the Trojan Horse."

"I agree," Watson said. "But you might be the Trojan Horse."

"You still think it was me?"

"Ranpo, you must know that the Trojan Horse is the name of a computer virus," Watson said.

Hajime interrupted. "A computer virus? I've heard of that, but I don't know what it is."

"It's a type of program that invades normal computer programs and destroys them. It's

contagious, like a disease."

"In other words," Watson explained, "the murderer is claiming to be like a computer virus. If we are a healthy, functioning computer program, then the Trojan Horse tries to invade and destroy us."

"Then, you could be the murderer, Ranpo. A computer virus starts wreaking havoc after invading a computer."

"You don't give up, do you? Can you prove you aren't the Trojan Horse yourself?" Ranpo demanded.

"What's the use of arguing?" Hajime put in. "I think it'd be more productive to establish alibis.

If we can determine what time Sojo was murdered, then we can find out what each of you was doing at the time, right?"

"Clever, Kosuke Kindaichi's grandson," Watson said.

Ranpo turned to Hajime in surprise. "You mean you're the grandson of the famous detective, Kosuke Kindaichi?"

"Yes," Miyuki answered for Hajime. "Hajime's grandfather was the master detective of his day."

"Then I'd like to hear your analysis. What time would you say Sojo was killed?"

Hajime scratched his head and asked another question in reply. "How long does a computer stay on if you don't touch it?"

"It depends on the network. On the one we use, about ten minutes."

"Then Sojo was killed at exactly 12:43 A.M."

"How can you know the exact time?" Watson asked, astounded.

"Easy. Look," Hajime said. He pointed to the screen. "See the time here at the bottom of the screen."

LOG OUT 9X/01/15 00:53:12

"This means 12:53 at night. And the date's today. You said you would return to your cottages and chat online as usual, right? The time here shows the second that conversation ended. And the warning here at the top, 'If you do not make an entry within the next five minutes, you will be disconnected.'" This means that the computer was not touched because Sojo had been killed."

"I see. Clear and simple," Ranpo said admiringly.

"But the murderer could have picked up where Sojo left off."

"The murderer gains nothing by doing that. For the murderer cannot fix an alibi unless he goes somewhere else. In any case, there'll be no alibi for 12:43 A.M. Watson, can you scroll the screen up a bit?"

Watson nodded. Frowning, he gingerly made his way around the body to the computer. In the spirit of the detective novels he loved, when he touched the keyboard, he covered his fingertips with his sleeves so as not to leave any fingerprints.

He scrolled up.

SOJO: "Someone's here. Might be Spenser. Just one moment, please," the screen said.

"This 'someone' must have killed Sojo," Hajime said.

"Then I have a perfect alibi," Watson said, clapping his hands together. "Look."

He scrolled up even further. More of the online conversation emerged, as did Watson's name.

"See? I was chatting with Sojo and the others, so I was in my cottage. Now I remember Sojo stopping, saying someone had come, but I didn't give it a second thought. We talked online for about thirty minutes more. I went to the bathroom once, but that only took a minute at the most.

You can ask the others. I can show you the record of the conversation on my computer, if you like."

"Who were you talking to?" Hajime asked.

"Patricia and Sid. Sid stopped chatting a minute or two after Sojo. But Patricia and I were chatting until about 1:10 A.M."

"I see. Ranpo, you weren't online in this?"

Ranpo shook his head gloomily. "No. All that time I was with Agatha in the main lodge."

"Agatha?"

"Yes. I must have arrived there around 10:20, and I was there until Patricia phoned around 1:30. If you don't believe me, call Agatha and ask her. We only parted an hour or so ago to go back to our cottages, so I bet she's still awake."

"I'll call her. Even if she's asleep, a murder 5counts as an emergency. In any case, I think we should all gather in one place," Hajime said, picking up the phone.

"Hello, this is Agatha." Her voice was a bit cracked. She had answered after two or three rings, but Hajime thought that in spite of what Ranpo had said, she might have been sleeping.

"It's Hajime. Sorry to disturb you so late but something terrible has happened."

"Something terrible?"

"Yes. Now don't panic, but Sojo has been murdered."

"What! I don't understand""

"I'm in Sojo's cottage with Miyuki, Watson, and Ranpo. We all received spooky phone calls telling us Sojo had been killed so we rushed here and found that it was true."

"Are you sure it's not some kind of bad joke?"

"Unfortunately, no."

Hajime waited a while for Agatha to recover from the shock. Then he said, "Agatha, I phoned you because I have a question."

"Yes?"

"After we left the lodge, where were you and what were you doing?"

Hajime knew Ranpo and Agatha were romantically attached, if only online. He did not want to push Agatha into defending Ranpo.

"It must have been around 10:20 PM.," Agatha said, lowering her voice. "Ranpo arrived and we were together until about an hour ago. Just chatting and so on in the main lodge. Is there a problem?"

"No, Ranpo said exactly the same thing."

Ranpo looked triumphantly at Watson. "See? I wasn't lying. My alibi is rock solid."

"Why are you looking at me, Ranpo? I have an alibi, too."

Hajime broke in. "Now, both of you have an alibi. In fact, everybody has an alibi: Agatha, who was with Ranpo; Patricia and Sid who were having an online conversation with you, Watson; and Miyuki and myself as we were together."

"An alibi for everyone," Ranpo whispered.

"Right," Hajime said, fiddling with the phone, which he had not yet hung up. Still, this lodge is totally isolated because of the blizzard, so it's hard to imagine an outsider slipping in."

"What are you implying?" Ranpo demanded.

Watson jumped in before Hajime could answer. "An isolated lodge, an alibi for each of the characters...In other words, you are saying that this is the 'impossible crime' that's often in detective novels, right?" "You could say that."

"But you have failed to notice one important thing," Watson said, his eyes gleaming behind his spectacles.

"Spenser is the murderer," Watson declared. "He should be here, too. Did you see him, Ranpo?"

"No. Has he got here?"

"I think so. He and Sojo must have had a falling out, and he killed Sojo."

"Why would he do a thing like that? Don't say such things!"

Watson was taken aback by Ranpo's anger. "But everything makes sense if we see it that way," he persisted. "At this point Spenser doesn't have an alibi. Don't you agree, Hajime?"

Hajime looked away from Watson. "I don't know. Nobody's met him, and we don't know if he's really here or not. In any case, a man has been murdered. We should all gather in one place and...Oh, I forgot."

He remembered he had not replaced the receiver. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Agatha."

"No-problem. But can I speak to Ranpo?"

"Just a moment."

Hajime handed the phone to Ranpo.

"Ranpo here." Pause. "Are you OK? Sorry to disturb you so late." Pause again. "See you later then. Bye."

Ranpo hung up and turned to the others. "First, let's all go to the main lodge. I'll phone the others so the rest of you go there first."

"OK. Come on, Miyuki," Hajime said.

Hajime, Watson, and Miyuki left Sojo's cottage.

Outside the blizzard was still raging. The powdery snow on the ground was mingling with the falling snow.

Hajime glanced at his watch. Just after 2:40 A.M. Half an hour since they arrived at Cottage No. 2 and hardly a trace of their footprints.

No wonder he hadn't found the murderer's footprints when they arrived around 2:10 A.M. One hour in this weather and there'd be no trace at all.

So the murderer would have left at 1:10 A.M. at the latest, and the time recorded on the computer meant the murder had been committed around 0:43 A.M. That made sense.

Watson returned to his cottage, saying he wanted to put on a sweater before going to the main lodge. Hajime and Miyuki felt a little cold but headed for the main lodge anyway.

Hajime tried to visualize what happened.

"Sojo is sitting in front of the computer, tapping at the keyboard. The murderer knocks. Sojo tells his online friends that someone is at the door and goes to answer it. The murderer stabs him, tidies up, and flees. After checking to make sure that the blizzard has covered his footprints, the murderer calls Hajime, Ranpo, and Watson, claiming to be the Trojan Horse.

Two things bothered Hajime. First, why did the murderer leave the computer on, giving a precise record of the time of the murder? Was the murderer in such a panic that he or she forgot to turn it off? Or was this intentional? Second, why did the murderer leave the key in the door?

Hajime had more or less guessed the answer to this one. The murderer wanted Hajime and the others to enter the cottage. That's why he left the key in the lock and the door ajar and the bathroom door wide open so that the interior of the cottage was in full view. And that's why he'd left the

curtains slightly open, too, so they could see in from outside.

But why make all those phone calls informing them of the murder? Hajime and the others might well have been too frightened to go to the cottage.

"Hajime, we're here," said Miyuki, bringing Hajime back to earth. They had arrived at the main lodge.

Tatsumi hung up the phone. He let out a deep sigh and leaned back on the bed. Then he pulled out a cigarette and lighter.

"Damn!" he said, lighting his cigarette. "Why did it have to turn out like this?" he muttered.

After all that trouble! The four-wheel-drive taxi ploughing through thick snow to get here! Only four and a half hours since his arrival at 10:20 PM. and already a murder! And not only that, but he was even a suspect!

He had looked forward to this online Lodge party so much. He had hardly been able to wait to act the role of a student at a top-flight university for three days. For three days he should have been able to forget he had failed to get into college two years in a row.

Now the dream was turning into a nightmare. It had started off all right; he had enjoyed holding hands with Agatha and kissing her.

His own hand shook. He was about to stub out his cigarette when he thought better of it. If I leave a cigarette butt here, who knows what Watson will say.

He looked down and saw the man he had known only as Sojo lying lifeless in a pool of ~blood. "Not on your life," he swore and kicked the door open.

I am standing in the snow again. Once again I'm wearing the bloodstained plastic coat I'd hidden in the snow. I didn't take it back to my cottage because I didn't want to take the one-in-a-million chance of leaving bloodstains from the coat on the furniture. That would be conclusive evidence.

With three survivors, a perfect alibi, and no material evidence or motive, the police don't have any case against me.

Just as the detective novels say, I must be extra-careful about fingerprints and bloodstains.

In my hand I am still holding the knife I used to kill Sojo. My hands have stopped shaking. I had to wear rubber gloves over my ski gloves when I stabbed him. Otherwise my fingerprints would have been inside the rubber gloves and I would not have been able to discard them in the snow.

That's why I chose this method and why the rubber gloves are bloodstained. After I kill my next victim, I'll hide the gloves somewhere. I may need to use them again.

Ah, I see someone in red coming out of Cottage No. 2"Ranpo!

I'll hide here behind Cottage No. 1. Here he comes; he doesn't suspect a thing. My knife is ready.

Tatsumi wondered why Sojo had been murdered. He knew that depending on the motive, he might also be a target.

Did the murderer have a grievance against Sojo as an individual or as a member of the Online Lodge?

If the latter, it must have something to do with that incident seven months ago. What am I saying? That was a perfect crime. No, it was not even a crime! I don't even feel any guilt. All he had done was scrub some graffiti off a sidewalk. It was nothing to die for.

Oh, my God, he thought. He had thought of this party as fun something to take his mind off his endless cramming for college entrance exams.

As for Sojo, maybe he had been secretly meeting one of the other members of the club and they had had a fight. Yes, it had to be that.

He took a few steps forward, then felt a pain in his side.

The knife slipped in easily, right up to the hilt. Easier than Sojo!

Ranpo was not even aware that he had been stabbed and turned to face Takuma.

He tried to say something, but Takuma stabbed him again, this time in the stomach.

The knife slid in about fifteen centimetres.

"Aarghh!" moaned Ranpo, spewing out a mouthful of blood.

Instinctively Takuma leaped out of the way.

"Wh-Why are you doing this?" Ranpo asked, coughing up more blood.

Breathing harshly, Takuma answered, "You know."

Ranpo's eyes widened as though he had just heard a voice from hell. Sputtering, his face grew paler and was wrenched with despair. Takuma, stifling a scream, ran off. Ranpo's groans were lost in the wailing wind.

Chapter 4

Perfect Alibis

Although the central heating was almost too hot, the people in the lodge were shivering from the shock of the murder.

"Shall I stoke up the fire?" Watson asked, noticing that people were huddling around the fireplace.

"I'll do it," Hajime said, and he began piling on small logs. Normally, Hajime was slow on his feet, but now he wanted to feel the heat of a real fire not the sterile warmth of central heating.

The logs caught immediately and the crackling of the flames brought some cheer to the silent room.

Hajime felt better and looked at the other six people gathered there. They, too, seemed a bit livelier, or perhaps it was just the glow of the fire giving their cheeks some color.

"Ranpo's taking his time, isn't he?" Agatha whispered.

"He's probably calling the police. That's very like him," Patricia said, as if talking about an old friend, even though she had only met him online.

"The police? Maybe we should call the police, too," Sid said. Gone was the sulky youth who had borrowed the name of Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols. He was no longer lolling on the sofa or putting his feet up on the table. His sunglasses were gone, too.

Hajime felt that all the members were reverting to their true selves. Watson had shed his false smile; now everything he said and did reeked of cold egotism. Agatha seemed to grow more and more adult. Patricia seemed to have far too much experience to be a girls' comic artist.

He sensed that this was his chance to glimpse their true characters. Yet one of them could be the Trojan Horse.

"We can call the police, but in this weather they can't get here quickly. I think that it's time for everyone to reveal their true identities. Could you please tell me your real names, where you're from, and what you do?"

"Wait, Hajime," Patricia broke in. "You're implying that we're lying. We're using handles, but that's because we want to continue the relationships we created online. I, for one, am definitely against revealing my true identity, and I don't want to know those of the others, either."

"But a man's been killed. You need to sort out your priorities. In any case, when the police get here, you'll have to tell the truth. What difference does it make if you do it now?"

"I'm not going to take this shit, either. You think you're a cop, Kindaichi?" Sid asked, resuming his former tone.

"I'm against it, too," Agatha said.

"I'm not ready yet, either. Of course, if the police ask, I'll have to, but..." Watson added. "For God's sake, what's happened to Ranpo and Spenser?" Watson continued, trying to change the subject.

"Ranpo did say that he would call everyone, then come here, right? Oh, I hope something awful hasn't happened..." Agatha looked at the other men like a damsel in distress.

"OK. Leave it to us guys," Sid said, giving Hajime and Watson a thump on the shoulder. "Come to think of it, I've never met Spenser or Ranpo. What does Ranpo look like? What's he wearing?"

"A flashy red jacket," Watson replied.

"Yes, he's tall and he had a thick red muffler around his neck," Agatha added. "Be careful. And do bring him here."

She was almost in tears.

Patricia gave her a comforting pat on the shoulders. "Check Spenser's cottage, too, though we haven't a clue what he looks like."

"Bad idea! I'm sure he's the one who made those phone calls the Trojan Horse!"

"No, Watson, I don't think the man called Spenser is the murderer," Hajime said. He was putting on his jacket, ready to go outdoors.

"How can you be so sure when you've never even met him?" Watson asked.

"It's because I've never met him."

"What do you mean?" Sid asked.

He, Patricia, and Agatha stared at Hajime, perplexed.

"Like everyone else, I've never met Spenser. If he's the murderer, he's simply going to do whatever he has to do and then leave. He hasn't shown his face so far, so he'll have no intention of joining us later. But the Trojan Horse had to disguise his voice with that party gimmick. But we don't know what Spenser sounds like, and presumably we're not going to have a chance to match the voice with a face later."

The four detective novel buffs were obviously impressed. Miyuki looked at Hajime proudly.

Hajime continued, "So I think we should check Spenser's cottage as well as Ranpo's. Shall we go?"

Hajime clumped to the door in his ski boots. "See you later, Miyuki."

"Take care," Miyuki said with a wave.

Sid followed. Watson, looking dissatisfied, was the last of the three to leave.

"Hajime's great, isn't he, Miyuki?" Agatha said with a sigh the moment the door closed.

"He's just like a real detective. It must be in the genes!" Patricia added.

Miyuki felt rather proud. "At school he's no genius, but at times like this he shows what he's made of. He's solved several cases in this way. An inspector at the MPD really depends on him." "You must be soooo proud of your boyfriend," Patricia said saucily.

"W-We're not like that! I've known him since we were small we live very close and we went to the same kindergarten, primary, middle, and high schools. That's why we hang out together."

Miyuki was blushing.

"Are you sure? If you don't watch out, I'll take him," Patricia said, licking her lips.

Patricia and Agatha looked at each other and laughed.

"Frankly, I'm relieved," Patricia said. "I was really scared when the murder took place in this isolated place. But seeing Hajime in action, I feel he'll take care of us."

"Oh, he will, Patricia, he will," Miyuki said, looking outside.

Still, she felt uneasy as she watched the snow. She thought she heard a human cry amid the wail of the blizzard.

Watson screamed. Hajime and Sid ran up to him.

Hajime pushed Watson aside and kept moving forward, although it was not easy in the knee-deep snow and the blinding blizzard.

He stopped in front of a figure leaning against the cottage wall, wearing the familiar red jacket.

"Ranpo!"

Dark blood stained Ranpo's lips. His thick muffler was caked with brownish blood.

His eyes were closed. The light from the cottage and Hajime's torch illuminated a face that was deathly pale. His hair was white with a layer of settled snow. Combined with the fact that his body had already stiffened unnaturally, he looked like an old man.

"H-He's dead," Watson stammered, slumping to the ground.

"Ranpo, who did this?" Hajime cried.

He thought he saw the frozen lips move slightly.

"Ranpo, please tell me who did this!" Hajime pleaded.

The chest rose almost imperceptibly, and the lips moved again. "Pa... tri..."

"Ranpo, once more, please!"

Hajime shook Ranpo's shoulders. Sid felt his pulse.

"It's no use. He's dead," Sid said.

Hajime, Miyuki, Agatha, Patricia, and Watson were in the main lodge. Sid was trying to call the police from the pay phone in front of the entrance. He had been gone over five minutes now.

The others sat in silence in front of the fireplace. The double-glazed windows kept out the roar of the blizzard from the lodge, with the result that the crackling of the logs seemed all the louder.

Watson got up and peered into the fire, clearing his throat several times. He was about to stoke the fire when the door opened.

It was Sid. He looked away, as if resenting the attention focused upon him and said, "We're in for it now."

"Wh-What do you mean?" Watson asked, throwing down the poker. "What about the police? They're coming right away, aren't they?"

"Calm down," Sid said. "None of the phones work: neither the pay phone nor the one in the kitchen. The lines are out."

"Out? Because of the snow?" Watson asked.

"No," Sid almost spat out. "Someone tampered with them. The Trojan Horse. Damn!" he cried and started trembling, as if all his suppressed fear had erupted.

Watson gave a wail and started pacing back and forth.

"Wh-What's going to happen to us?" Agatha cried, burying her face in her hands.

"What did we do to deserve this?" Patricia sobbed.

Hajime, however, was observing them coolly. He knew that the murderer was one of them. He knew that one of them was lying.

"I'll get you, Trojan Horse," he whispered, his fists clenched.

From the radio and television they learned that the blizzard was expected to last three days. It was at least ten kilometres to the nearest house, and trying to walk there in such weather would be suicidal.

Hajime expected the caretaker of the cottages to come when he found he couldn't telephone them, but he couldn't just sit and wait around for help.

"I'm telling you you're wrong!" Patricia cried hysterically.

Watson was convinced Patricia was the murderer because of the syllables Ranpo had uttered with his last breath.

"Why would I kill Ranpo?" Patricia said, her lips trembling.

"But I heard him say your name as he lay dying. Sid and Hajime heard it, too."

"Wait. All I heard was 'Pa...tri'" Hajime said.

"I didn't hear him say Patricia's name clearly." Sid nodded. "Same here. It just sounded like that."

"But your name is the only one that begins with 'Patri.'" And those phone calls we received!

I bet they were made using the 'Frog Voice' you brought, Patricia."

"You can buy a toy like that anywhere! Besides, I have an alibi," Patricia said, almost pouncing on Watson.

"Wait," Hajime said. "I think it's a bit risky to draw conclusions based on Ranpo's last words. As Patricia says, she has an alibi. Patricia came into this lounge a few minutes after Miyuki and me. Ranpo had been stabbed in the stomach many times, and he was bleeding a lot. It's hard to believe that he stayed alive for ten or twenty minutes like that." I am always aware of time, so I remember it was twenty minutes between the time Patricia came in and the time we discovered Ranpo. Which means that time-wise it was impossible for Patricia to kill Ranpo."

"Then who's the murderer, Hajime?" Watson asked.

"First, we must establish each person's alibi, right?" Hajime looked at the group.

"Fine," Sid said.

"OK. Let's start with alibis for Sojo's murder. It's amazing, but everyone here has an alibi."

"What do you mean?" Patricia demanded. Hajime nodded. "I realized everyone had an alibi when I talked to Watson and Ranpo at Sojo's cottage after we got those phone calls from the Trojan Horse and rushed to the cottage. Ranpo told me that he and Agatha were together in the main lodge until around the time of Sojo's death. Meanwhile, Watson, Sid, and Patricia were having an online conversation. Right?"

They looked at one another and nodded.

Then Sid said, "How do you know what time Sojo died? If you're going to tell me Watson figured it out, I don't accept it. The speed of rigor mortis changes depending on the temperature."

"We found better evidence," Hajime said. The time 0:53 A.M. was recorded in Sojo's computer. A computer turns itself off when you don't touch it for ten minutes, which means that Sojo was murdered ten minutes before at 0:43. Now, I want to ask all of you, did any of you go to Sojo's cottage three hours ago?"

No one replied.

"Nobody. This means that Sojo's visitor had to be the murderer the Trojan Horse. Someone must have gone to Sojo's cottage, but you all deny it. However, the murderer changed his or her voice with the ~Frog Voice, implying that we know that voice. This means the murderer is one of you six who's hiding the fact that you visited Sojo's cottage at 0:43 A.M."

"Brilliant!" Watson said, clapping his hands together. "But who? Everyone has an alibi, so no one could have killed Sojo. Or are you saying that Sojo pretended someone was at the door and then stabbed himself? That Sojo committed suicide?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"The murderer used some kind of sophisticated trick to make it appear as though he or she has an alibi."

"A trick? Goodness, we are in the world of detective novels," Watson said, with a sneer.

"I've already said what Miyuki, Patricia, and myself were doing," Hajime said briskly. "Now Sid, you arrived about five minutes after Patricia, right?"

"If you say so," Sid said, without looking at Hajime.

"This means that you came here about ten minutes before we discovered the dying Ranpo. It's close, but you do have an alibi. Agatha, you arrived exactly four minutes after Sid. Which means you don't have an alibi, right?"

Hajime scrutinized her. She had been silent for some time.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Finally, you, Watson. You arrived two minutes after Agatha. Four minutes after you came, we found Ranpo. This means, Watson, that you also don't have an alibi for the Ranpo murder."

"How dare you talk to me like that! Are you saying I'm the murderer? God, this really pisses me off!" He waved his arms as if to emphasize the point.

"I think the murderer is tricking us into thinking he or she has an alibi. So for both these murders I don't think having an alibi means much. We must consider the case from a different angle. Otherwise we are in for more trouble."

"More trouble?" Agatha echoed.

"More murders."

"It's...because of that incident," Patricia whispered.

The faces of Sid, Watson, and Agatha grew tense for a moment. They looked at one another, then Watson spoke, as if for all of them. "Let's call it a day. We're not going to be able to leave for a while, not in this snowstorm. We should get some sleep while we can, otherwise we won't last until help comes."

He picked up his jacket from the sofa. "Let's lock our doors and make sure we don't open them until morning. Why don't we also call each other first thing in the morning and make sure we are all OK before we meet here?"

"Good idea," Sid said.

Agatha was also quietly preparing to return to her room.

Hajime, however, was sure that each of these group members had done something to deserve a death sentence. That was why they weren't willing to reveal their true identities.

"Agatha, can I ask you something?" Hajime asked as Agatha was about to leave.

He needed to know more about these people before they returned to their cottages. He knew that knowing their true identities was the key to solving the murders.

He approached Agatha first, feeling that the role she was playing a high school girl was closer to her real self than the roles adopted by the others.

"Yes, Hajime?" Agatha asked, staring up at him.

"My, that's some stare," Hajime said jokingly.

"Are you suspicious of me? Or are you near-sighted?"

Agatha lowered her defences and smiled. "I have perfect 1.5/1.5 vision. My eyesight is one of the few things I'm proud of."

"Come on, I bet you have lots of things to be proud of. With a face like that, you could be a TV star!" He made a gesture as if to poke Agatha in the chest.

Miyuki pulled Hajime's ponytail. "Stop that right now! That's sexual harassment!"

"Ouch, Miyuki, please!"

Seeing them act like a couple of comedians made Agatha burst out laughing. "You really like each other, don't you? I'm jealous I don't have anyone."

"I don't believe that! What are the boys doing, with someone as cute as you around? Don't you agree, Hajime?" Miyuki asked.

Miyuki realized that Hajime was up to something.

"Well, Agatha," Hajime said, with a confiding air, "I am beginning to think that computers and e-mail and online chats look interesting, and I'd like to try it myself. Can you give me some advice about the kind of hardware to buy, Agatha?"

Agatha looked surprised. "Hajime! Are you sure you want to discuss computers at a time like this?"

"Well, it's not the first time I've had to deal with murder."

Hajime gave Miyuki a fleeting glance, then said, "About computers..."

"Just a moment." Agatha found a memo pad and a pen and began writing. The ruby ring on her finger glimmered.

That's not the kind of ring a high school girl would wear, he thought. Just as I suspected.

"Here. If you have any one of these, you'll be OK," Agatha said. She handed him a piece of paper with computer names written on it.

"Thanks! How much is one of these?"

"Oh, about ¥200,000."

"Two hundred thousand? I couldn't earn that much in a lifetime!"

Agatha and Miyuki laughed.

"They're expensive, but you'll regret it if you don't buy quality products," Agatha said.

"Maybe I should think again."

"Then why don't you start with a word processor? You can get one for around ¥100,000."

"Maybe. You must be rich, Agatha. I mean, the computer you brought here must also be an expensive model, right?"

For a moment, Agatha's expression clouded, but she soon regained her smiling composure. "Yes, but I earned some of that money doing a part-time job."

"Where did you find such a well-paying job? You're so cute and you have such a nice figure, maybe you're a model. I'd like a job like that, but they wouldn't take me." Miyuki gazed at Agatha with large, friendly eyes.

Agatha looked embarrassed. "Modelling? Of course not. You can make good money as a computer programmer, playing around with software."

"A computer programmer? Must be hard having a job like that as well as going to high school," Hajime ventured.

Agatha was silent for a moment before replying, "It's no problem. Besides, my high school is

very lenient about absences and the teachers often cancel their lectures."

Agatha smiled, seemingly relieved at having replied. But Hajime noticed some important details.

"Agatha, you're a college student, aren't you?"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"High school students don't talk about lectures college students do. While we're on the subject, that ring on your right hand is a little too flashy for a high school student, isn't it?"

Agatha's eyes showed a new harshness. "So what?" she asked.

"Agatha, please tell me your real name. Or if you don't want to, at least tell me what the Online Lodge did to deserve this?"

"No."

"We already know that you're not a high school student. What about the others, Sid and Watson?"

"So what if 'm not a high school student? Of course the others are lying too, we know that. But that's all right, we want to continue the relationships we had online. We don't want outsiders like you interfering."

Agatha started for the door. She opened it to find Watson standing there.

"Ah, you're still here?" Watson asked, looking coldly at Hajime and Miyuki. "You'd better go back to your room, too. Otherwise"he narrowed his eyes"the Trojan Horse will get you."

Watson smiled a crooked smile, let Agatha out, then closed the door like a jailer.

Hajime and Miyuki stayed in the main lodge. Hajime crouched in front of the fireplace and began shovelling ash over the dying embers.

Miyuki brought him some hot green tea and asked, "I wonder why they're trying so hard to hide their real identities. Once the police arrive, they'll have to tell the truth anyway."

Hajime turned to her and said, "Yes, the police will question each of them and learn their real names and so on. But they only want the police to know that information. In other words, they want to continue not knowing the truth about one another. The police are duty-bound to protect their privacy, if that is what they want. Inspector Kenmochi told me that."

"How sad that they can be themselves in front of the police but not in front of their friends. I suppose it's as Agatha said: they want to continue the relationships they had before."

"No, I don't agree. Two of their online friends have been murdered, so there's no way they can continue in that happy-go-lucky style. In fact, I'm sure they want to cut all ties with each other. They never want to see each other again, that's why they don't want to reveal their identities."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm no expert about online communications, but if you don't tell people who you are, there is no way they can track you down. All they know are those handles, right?"

"Yes. Patricia told me that this way of communicating is very popular these days."

"Then I'm right. They never want to see one another again. All they have to do is to cancel their handles or change them and it'll be the same as if they never knew each other."

"I suppose so. I wonder why the group wants to disband so much. I mean, they went to great lengths to create false identities for themselves and come to this isolated ski lodge. Why change at this point? Because of the murders?"

"I don't think that's all."

"What then?"

"I think this group did something horrible in the past."

"Something horrible?"

"Yes, and I think it would be a problem if the police learned about it. At the moment, it's a group secret. That's why they're so reluctant to reveal their identities. If they go their separate ways after this, whatever they did will die a natural death."

"You mean they did something criminal?"

"If my instincts are correct, what they did is connected with the motive for these murders."

Hajime covered the logs with ash. With a final splutter, the flames seemed to die away.

But no one crimson flame was flickering beneath the white ash.

"It's not over yet, Miyuki," Hajime said.

As if to back up his statement, the flame flared up again.

Tzumi was sitting in front of his computer.

Why did it come to this? Who is the murderer?

He typed these sentences, but got no answer. Still, just looking at the screen made him feel better.

He felt himself longing for his ordinary daily life as a computer programmer. He wanted to flee right now to his safe and peaceful home.

Communicating with strangers online had been a bit of an adventure for him. It was a way of escaping from the monotony of his life and entering a world of virtual reality. He could enter it in the middle of the night and vanish into a world of exciting dreams.

Izumi came here, to the middle of nowhere, because he wanted to get a stronger grip on that

dream world. This party, bringing together people he had met in the world of virtual reality, should have been like a sophisticated game.

But look at what had happened! Two people had been murdered in one night!

What's the motive? Izumi typed.

He wondered if "that incident" seven months ago had something to do with it.

At this, his heart began beating wildly.

If these murders were really motivated by that incident, then he himself was not safe, either. He never dreamed that doing something so simple would endanger his life. He had only taken part to relieve his stress, just to taste the thrill of committing a pseudo-criminal act. He had only helped with the crime, not perpetrated it.

I have done nothing wrong.

"That' right, nothing. He had done nothing illegal. The young man had been unlucky, the victim of a series of accidents. In any case, the gods had dealt him a just fate a women's magazine had said as much.

Nothing wrong, nothing nothing wrong. Fate, fate, fate.

He typed furiously, as if defending himself against the faceless murderer.

Yoshiyuki couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, frequently leaping out of bed to check the door. Nervous by nature, he had always been a light sleeper. The smallest sound would wake him.

He had grown up never questioning the path set by his parents. If they told him to study, he would sit at his desk. When they told him to go to cram school, he stopped going out with his classmates and went to cram school instead.

Once in college, he realized that he was so used to doing what he was told that he had no will of his own. He also realized that although he attended a top-flight medical school, the students were

not necessarily top-quality people. Even at the age of twenty, these fledgling doctors already regarded human life as something disposable. Part of Yoshiyuki had always questioned these values. Now he felt sick at the thought that he was in the same category as his classmates.

Ironically, he began rebelling against his parents after they bought him a personal computer for his medical research.

Out of curiosity, he surfed the net. There he met types of people he had never met before. He found this new world both odd and refreshing.

Yoshiyuki found he could create an identity that was entirely different from his own. He invented a family background, friends, hobbies a new personality. This identity gradually began to appear more real to him than his own self.

He had been the one who had proposed this off-line party. He had wanted to try out his new persona, the one he had cultivated online.

And this was the result! Yoshiyuki felt all too keenly now the difference between the real world and that of virtual reality. The reflected image was not allowed to step out of the mirror, after all.

When Hajime Kindaichi asked him to reveal his true identity, he had felt sick with anxiety. He managed to bluff, trying desperately to suppress his real self, which kept trying to pop out.

Yoshiyuki was very afraid. What if his parents found out about this off-line party? What if their friends and relatives found out he had been involved in a murder?

More than that, he was terrified of being unable to quit this game, of being endlessly pursued by the faceless monster called the Trojan Horse.

He stared up at the ceiling and remembered how seven months ago, in the world of virtual reality, he had committed a crime. The following day, after he had read each of the major newspapers, he had breathed a sigh of relief.

All he had done was kick a hole in a phone kiosk. But that action had started a chain of events that led to horrifying results.

The members of the online Lodge had planned everything. Certainly the plan made sense theoretically, but Yoshiyuki had been doubtful whether it would actually work.

Now he was full of regrets. He was sure that that "incident" was the reason why Sojo and Ranpo had been murdered.

He wanted to apologize out loud to the person who hated them so much because of it. But he knew that his only chance of doing so would be when he himself was on the verge of death.

Yoshiyuki leaped out of bed again. He paced around the room, checking the lock and the windows. Nothing had happened, yet he sensed that something was about to. It was 4 A.M. He predicted that he would be getting in and out of bed and pacing until morning, until everyone went to the main lodge. Until he was able to leave this room. Or until the Trojan Horse had him in its grip.

"I don't want to die. Mother, Father, help!"

The radio is blasting away. I am leaning against the wall, looking at the objects laid out on the table: a sturdy rope; liquid chemicals sealed in a plastic bag; a syringe and needle; capsules; and the powdered root of a dried poisonous plant. The last murder weapon a slender, bloodstained knife I have hidden in a hole in a tree outside.

I probably won't have to use that knife for a while. I have enough of this "stuff" to kill the three remaining online Lodge members all in one go, if necessary. The only problem is those two high school kids, Hajime and Miyuki. I don't want to kill them.

They really are a nuisance, especially Hajime. He's very sharp. Little by little, he's getting closer to the truth.

I must be careful. Depending on how things turn out, they may have to be killed, too.

In any case, I will commit the next murder when the members are all back in their cotrages. Tonight? No, right now everyone is too cautious, too much on the defensive. If I force things, I might make a mistake.

I mustn't rush.

The radio program interrupts a boring ballad to give the weather forecast. Blizzards predicted for tomorrow and the day after. Perfect! If the weather was clearing up, I'd have to kill them all tonight.

But that seems unnecessary. I shall act slowly, carefully.

I clear my throat, then place the murder weapons in my backpack. I change into my nightclothes and lie on my bed. When I put my hand to my chest, I can feel my heartbeat. A quiet but firm pulse. How cold-blooded I have become! How calm! With these hands I have killed two human beings, but my heart is as cool as a snow crystal. Maybe somewhere along the way I've ceased to be human.

Perhaps it was that day, that day of utter despair. My heart died then, and what lies here now is none other than the Trojan Horse, a computer virus that is programmed to eradicate.

I re-examine the program for errors. Fine, everything is fine. Nobody here knows the true identities of the others. If they all die, then all clues leading to the motive will vanish with them.

A perfect crime! I turn off the radio and then the bedside light.

In the dark I suddenly hear a moaning amid the roar of the blizzard.

It is a sad cry, yet it also offers a ray of hope. The wind carries its echo, then it disappears. I throw off the blanket and get out of bed to try to hear it once more, but I cannot. Am I hallucinating? No, that was a plea from the other world, a cry from the deep. I know that voice and what it was trying to say...

Takuma, stop!

In the darkness I say to that voice, "I know." But it's too late. Things have been set in motion and I am powerless to stop them. Ever since that first murder...

I wipe out the echoes of the voice from my mind and pull the blanket up over my head.

Chapter 5

A Posthumous online Message

It was morning. Everything the stove, the microwave, the heating was working, everything except the phone.

The main lodge was warm and comfortable. The three women cooked a delicious breakfast, but no one talked much, and after eating they all returned gloomily to their cottages.

Watson did not even come to the lounge. Sid was there, his eyes glued to the television set.

Patricia and Agatha were clearing up as if in slow motion, as if they wanted to kill time and get out of here as soon as they could.

The television weather report gaily informed them that the blizzard would last a few more days.

"They've got to be joking!" Sid spat out, turning off the set. "Is this what they call ~Skiers Paradise?" We don't even know if we'll get out of here alive!"

"It's no use getting angry at the television," Patricia said, putting a cup of coffee in front of him.

Sid didn't answer. He looked up at Patricia, then poured some milk in his coffee.

"Here's one for you, Hajime," Patricia said, putting a cup in front of him. She smiled. Hajime admired her for having the courage to smile, but he felt it was rather forced. Or was it because she was the murderer?

Hajime was about to pour some milk in his coffee when Sid stopped him. "Wait," he said, putting his hand on Hajime's cup, the three silver bracelets on his wrist tinkling. "I want my coffee black, after all. Do you mind changing?"

"Not at all."

Hajime pushed his cup toward Sid and took the other cup.

Watching this, Patricia said, "Do you think I put poison in it?"

"No! I just want it black!"

Patricia picked up her teddy bear and flounced back to the kitchen.

Sid let out a curse.

Looking at him, Hajime again wondered how much was an act and how much was real. In fact, the same could be said of all of them...

Sid stood up. "I'm going back to my cottage. I'm going crazy here," he said, leaving the lounge.

Patricia returned, carrying her own coffee. "I'm fed up with this."

"The other two aren't joining us?" Hajime asked.

"Agatha and Miyuki are washing up, but they're not talking at all. Did they have a quarrel?"

"Maybe we went too far yesterday," Hajime said, scratching his head.

Patricia lowered her cup from her mouth. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, tell me."

Hajime looked irritably at Patricia, who was leaning forward, all ears.

"I asked her what the online Lodge had done in the past."

"What do you mean?" Patricia asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I mean that you guys must have done something to put your lives in danger," Hajime said.

Patricia looked away nervously. "I don't know what you mean. Did Agatha say anything?"

"No. It makes one wonder what you are all trying so hard to hide."

"None of your business!" Patricia spat out in a low voice. Hajime felt he caught a glimpse of the real woman behind the facade.

"It is my business now that we've become involved. Our lives are in danger, too. Patricia, tell me! What did you do to deserve all this?"

Patricia remained glum and silent. Hajime sensed she'd be even more stubborn than Agatha the previous night.

"Then let's change the subject," he proposed.

Patricia said nothing.

"I won't ask about it." Hajime sighed. "But there's one thing I forgot to ask you last night, about the time Sojo was killed. OK?"

Patricia smiled.

"When we were at the murder scene, Ranpo and Watson and I were talking about alibis, and Ranpo told me that you called him around 1:30 AM."

"Me?" Patricia looked at him in disbelief.

"Yes. I didn't give it much thought because the time has nothing to do with an alibi. But you haven't said anything about a phone call. Did you make that phone call?"

"No, I never made a phone call." She was shaking her head.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. What's the use of lying about s-something like that? As you say, it's got nothing to do with any alibi."

"So why did Ranpo say it?"

Hajime turned away, lost in thought, his chin resting on his fist. Patricia watched him and let out a giggle.

"You really do like playing the detective, don't you? You're like a hero in a thriller the boy detective!"

"We'll all be in trouble if we don't find the murderer soon. You should be careful, too."

Patricia giggled again. "I feel I can depend on you to solve it."

"What do you mean?"

"On a closer look, you're really quite cute. I'm becoming jealous of Miyuki."

Hajime guffawed.

Suddenly the door opened and Miyuki poked her head in. "Why are you two grinning like that?"

She came in with her coffee. She stared questioningly at Hajime and Patricia.

"Miyuki, you said your father bought a Mac," Patricia asked.

Miyuki looked puzzled. "Yes."

"Then you know how to use a computer."

"I suppose so."

Patricia began to drink her coffee at last.

Then she turned to Hajime. "About what we did in the past..."

"Are you ready to talk about it?"

"Not now. But if something happens to me, I want you to read a secret document in my computer."

"A secret document?"

"But don't you need a password to read that, Patricia?"

"A password? What's that?" Hajime asked Miyuki.

"Something like a private code. Only a person who knows the password can read the document."

"I see. Will you tell us the password, Patricia?"

Patricia hesitated for a moment. "All right. Its""

The door burst open.

"Another dead body!" Sid shouted.

Sid had found the body buried in the snow behind his cottage.

The wind had suddenly changed direction and blown away some snow to reveal part of the body.

A thin, frozen arm poked out of the fresh new snow like a withered twig. It was unmistakably a -

woman's arm, although the nails were short, without nail polish.

"How long has it been here?" Watson asked. He had rushed out of his cottage on hearing the news.

Sid just shook his head, unable to answer.

Hajime began to clear away the snow from the body. "Since last night," he said. "I think it was buried after we returned to the cottages."

"How can you tell?" Watson demanded.

Hajime took a fistful of snow. "Look! It's a little dirty and hard, so it's the bottom snow. The fact it was near the top means that someone buried the body with that shovel."

Hajime pointed to the shovel leaning against the cottage.

"The person who killed this woman must have been in a hurry. That's why he or she did not bother to dig a deep hole, barely covering the body and leaving the snow to do the rest. But the wind changed direction and exposed the body. Help me dig her up before she gets covered again."

Hajime took the shovel and got to work, with the other two men helping.

Meanwhile, the blizzard raged. Despite the freezing conditions, they found themselves sweating. As he worked, Hajime glanced at the other two men. Were they doing anything strange, like tampering with the body?

The victim's face soon emerged from the snow. She must have been a cute and attractive young woman, he observed, with short hair, long eyelashes, and a small nose and mouth.

The others stopped working to look at her, too. All the women, except Miyuki, moved closer for a better view.

"Who is she?" Agatha whispered, her lips trembling either from fear or from cold.

"Never seen her, ever," Watson babbled.

"Maybe she got lost like Miyuki and you, Hajime," Sid said.

"No, she was murdered by the Trojan Horse," Hajime said, straightening up.

"How can you be sure?" Patricia asked.

"It's obvious someone buried the body. Would someone lost bury her own body? Besides, look at this."

With his gloved hands, Hajime carefully opened the woman's collar. "She's been strangled."

The three women turned away.

"Who is she? Why was she killed?" Sid asked, slumping onto the snow.

"Let's dig up the body first and take it somewhere. We can't leave the poor thing like this..."

When he started digging again, his shovel hit something. He dug carefully with his hands and found the object a large-sports bag.

"Does it belong to her?" Sid asked and he was about to open it when Hajime stopped him.

"We shouldn't do that here. Let's take it to the lodge and open it in front of everybody."

They returned to the lodge dining room. The bag was placed on the long dark oak dining table, large enough to seat ten.

"I'll start," Miyuki said. The online Lodge members had agreed she should examine the bag's contents since the victim was a girl and Miyuki was not a member of the group.

Miyuki opened the bag with her gloved hands. She scrutinized each item as she laid it on the table.

First, a thin, expensive-looking pink sweater. Second, a white blouse with red stripes. Third, a brand-name scarf. Each item was neatly folded. Then, a red cosmetics case containing foundation, mascara, lipstick, travel-size bottles of moisturiser, and so on. In a smaller case were soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste.

There was a sweat suit, presumably intended to be worn as pajamas. A personal computer emerged from a pink bath towel, then a modem and cord, also wrapped in a towel. Miyuki drew out a pen-size torch, and two frozen mandarin oranges.

A large case lay near the bottom. Inside were a sewing kit, knitting needles, balls of red wool, nail clippers, and a small pair of scissors.

Miyuki then picked up a tiny bear, the size of a human hand. The dead woman must have been very fond of it, for it was rather dirty.

From the bottom of the bag Miyuki retrieved a wallet. She emptied the contents onto the table: three 1,000-yen notes, six 10,000-yen notes, some change, and apartment keys.

Next, Miyuki drew out a plastic bag containing the woman's underwear. "I don't have to take these out, do I? Just some socks and underwear..."

The four others looked at one another.

"Just check that it's only underwear," Hajime said. "You don't have to spread it all out."

"Look at this." Miyuki drew out a white card.

"Her driver's license!" Sid exclaimed.

Miyuki checked the photograph. "It's definitely her," she said.

"What's her name, Miyuki?" Hajime asked.

"Er...Fumie lida."

"How old is she?"

"Er...nineteen. I wonder why she keeps her driver's license in her underwear."

"Maybe she thought that if she put it in her wallet, someone might accidentally see it and learn who she is. But if she was so careful, she..."

Hajime looked at the others, but their expressions were unchanged. He turned to Miyuki.

"Put the driver's license on the table, too. Is there anything else?"

Miyuki felt around the bag and found an inside pocket. From it she pulled out a book with a cloth cover.

"Open it," Hajime commanded.

"It's The Promised Land, by Robert B. Parker."

The moment Miyuki uttered these words, Watson began trembling with excitement.

"The Spenser series!" he cried.

"What?" Hajime asked.

"The American hard-boiled detective series that Spenser loved. You don't mean to say the woman who was killed was""

"Spenser! My God, Spenser was a woman!" Sid cried, pacing up and down.

Hajime's own mind was reeling at the idea that the dead woman had been an online Lodge

member.

If Spenser is a woman, then...He had found a major clue.

"Is it possible for a woman to chat online pretending to be a man?" Miyuki asked, incredulous.

"Of course!" Watson said. "If a person's name is not known, his or her gender can remain unknown, too. One of the cool things about online communication. Although there are usually more men pretending to be women."

"I never noticed anything," Agatha said.

"Me, neither. Spenser was so friendly with Ranpo, so masculine," Patricia said, shaking her head.

"So, as you said, Hajime, the murderer is not Spenser, is it Agatha asked, looking at Hajime.

Hajime nodded. "So it seems. The murderer""

"You've got to be joking! I'm going back to my cottage right now. The way things are, the only person who can protect me is me!" Patricia shouted, and she started to leave.

"Wait. We should try to stay together as much as possible, at least during the daytime," Hajime said.

But Patricia just glared at him, picked up her teddy bear, and marched out.

"I'm going back to my room, too. The murderer might be in this room, right? I don't want to die," Agatha said, and she followed Patricia out. The two men gave each other a look as if to say it was hopeless and donned their jackets. "Well, maybe it's best to stay in our cottages. Perhaps we should just phone one another before meals and wait for help to arrive when the blizzard stops," Sid said, leaving with Watson.

Asaka locked her door. To be extra safe, she barricaded it with a table, chair, and TV stand.

Holding a kitchen knife in her hand, she went to the window, opened the curtains, and checked outside. "Just try killing me. I'll kill you," she whispered.

What a long road it's been, she reflected. She remembered that spring break before high school graduation: she'd been working as a PR girl, handing out free packets of tissues in Fukuoka, when she was scouted by a man to become a model.

She'd come to Tokyo. That was at the height of the economic "bubble," and she'd had no trouble getting modeling work or being a companion at events.

Gradually the jobs petered out, so she started working nights as a bar hostess.

Asaka had been so thrilled to get that modeling assignment her first in a long while but when she showed up, she found herself surrounded by gangster-like characters who forced her to act in a porno movie.

Her life began to slide downhill. She lived with a gangster for a time, then ran away. She found an office job but left when her colleagues discovered she'd been a porno star. She held a series of jobs, and was now working at an erotic massage parlor near Ikebukuro Station.

She met many new men but none she could respect, and had two abortions. Deciding that her problem was due to a lack of culture, she took some adult education courses but did not have enough discipline to master anything.

After three years in Tokyo, she became interested in computers. Since it had cost her at least ¥300,000 to set one up, she was determined to stick with it. Besides, she'd learned the basics of computer operation in her office job and knew about online communications.

Asaka found a new identity. Six months later, she had chanced into a conversation with some suspense fiction enthusiasts.

She'd read very few crime novels, but she was eager to join in. An old lover had left Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem* in her apartment, so she adopted "Patricia" as her handle.

Her six new friends, aged from the late teens to the early twenties, all lived nearby in the Tokyo area. Someone came up with the idea of making a kind of online club; this was how the online Lodge began.

The following week, Asaka spent every day and night reading crime fiction. She absorbed enough to converse, superficially at least, with her newfound friends.

A month or so later, the members began revealing details of themselves. Sojo worked for a well-known trading company; Ranpo was a student at Waseda University; Spenser was at Keio University; Watson was a doctor; Agatha was a student at a prestigious private girls' school; and Sid was the bass guitarist in a popular punk rock band.

Asaka introduced herself as a girls' comic artist. She hit on the idea because she had once entered such a contest in high school and had received an honorable mention.

Asaka fed the online Lodge all the clichés of the profession: disputes with editors, moments of inspiration, fan letters that she always answered, "Thank you for your encouragement. Please keep reading my work."

She described events like going to a ritzy metropolitan hotel for a book-launching party in a Chanel suit. She got out of her taxi with her assistant in tow, and smiled at the editors who were waiting to greet her.

She was the object of much envy and admiration among the online Lodge members.

The computer world became Asaka's retreat from her increasingly sordid reality. Asking no questions about her identity, the other members would support, listen to, and sometimes argue with her. She felt she had known them all her life. It was a companionship she had never had.

Looking back now, she felt that that very sense of companionship had been their Achilles' heel. It had resulted in that "incident."

Asaka had been seduced by Sojo's words, "the perfect crime." Ah, she thought, maybe I agreed because I wanted to get my own back for what society did to me.

She remembered how carefully the online Lodge members had formulated their plan. Sojo and Ranpo were the masterminds. They would target a villain who had escaped prosecution. They chose a former teacher who had been involved in a scandal at a local high school.

Nonetheless, Asaka had been surprised when the plan actually worked. She had acted her part, yes, but with the casualness of someone playing a game.

It really did turn out to be "the perfect crime."

The man had died and the police treated his death as an accident!

Asaka knew now that these recent killings had something to do with that incident. Why else would the online Lodge members be killed, one by one?

She felt indignant. She had thought of that incident as a game. She'd had no real intention of righting society's wrongs. She wasn't going to die! she screamed at the faceless Trojan Horse. Not for leaving an open bottle of bleach in the non-burnable trash! Come and kill me if you dare, she cried. I'll kill you instead! She gripped her knife harder.

I'm standing in front of Patricia's cottage with a plastic bag. It is divided in two compartments, each one containing a different liquid chemical. When mixed together, they form cyanide gas.

Patricia, like all the others, except Hajime and Miyuki, has been locked up in her room all day. They must be realizing why this is happening. Ha-ha! Tremble and face up to your guilt. Know that no crime is more foul than one where the criminal feels no remorse.

I shall not allow you to escape. Never. You can hide in your rooms, but the Trojan Horse will find you. I'll pour these liquids under your door.

I'm slipping this bag in the crack under the door and slitting it with the knife that killed Sojo and Ranpo. There it goes, silently trickling into your room just like a computer virus.

Asaka smelt something and breathed in deeply. Immediately, she felt an excruciating pain her lungs she thought she was having an asthma attack. She tried desperately to breathe but she couldn't. Her lungs would not expand. Her head began to ache. She fell to the floor, flailing like a fish. What was this terrible pain? Had the air in her room suddenly been sucked away?

Instinctively she struggled to the door, but she had barricaded herself in. Frantic, she tried moving the table, but could not budge it. She had lost all strength in her arms and legs.

She slumped to the floor and began crawling. Panting for breath, she raised her head and noticed a plastic bag under her door. A thick liquid was trickling onto the tiles.

So that was it poison gas!

She didn't want to die, oh, she didn't want to die! She crawled to the phone to call the main lodge. By this time she had almost stopped breathing. Finally someone answered.

"H-Help..." she cried weakly.

"Who's this? This is Hajime. Who are you?"

"Patricia," she managed to squeeze out.

The receiver slipped from her hand. She could not support her body. She knew she was dying. She had no idea who the murderer was, but she had to leave clues; she was not going to let the murderer get away with everything.

That boy Hajime Kindaichi is the only one who could not be the murderer. She would leave him some clues. She would write something; oh no, not enough time.

Just before she lost consciousness, Asaka grabbed something.

"Patricia, Patricia, are you OK? Open the door!"

Hajime cried, banging on the door. "It's Hajime! Speak to me!"

Then he smelt something. He grabbed Miyuki and together they fell backward onto the snow.

"Hajime, what are you doing?" Miyuki squealed.

"For God's sake's, what do you think? There's a weird smell by the door."

"A smell?"

"Yes. Something's wrong. Patricia sounded in trouble on the phone. The door's locked so let's look through the window."

Hajime helped Miyuki up. They rushed to the window and looked in. Patricia was lying there, her legs stretched out stiff and straight. In her right hand was her beloved teddy bear, one arm stuck out as if seeking help.

"Oh my God!" Hajime knew instantly that it was a murder. The Trojan Horse had claimed another victim.

"All these murders! How many does he have to kill?" Miyuki was almost sobbing. Hajime put an arm around her shoulders.

"It's OK. I'm here," he said, but he, too, felt sick at heart. He was beginning to feel it was too late to stop this maniac. Pull yourself together, he told himself.

He looked through the window again to search for clues, and this time he noticed what Patricia was holding in her left hand. A black cord!

"That cord's attached to her computer. Why is she hanging on to that?"

Suddenly he said, "So that's what she means."

"What?" Miyuki asked.

Hajime did not answer her. Instead, he said, "We're going to tell everyone to meet here."

Crrrasshh! Hajime used a shovel to break the window pane of Patricia's cottage. Ignoring the disapproving looks of the others, he broke another one, too.

"Everyone keep away for a while." Hajime waved them back, speaking loudly so he could be heard over the blizzard.

"Patricia was poisoned by some kind of gas. We'll also be in trouble unless we let fresh air in."

"Poisonous gas?" Agatha put her hand to her mouth. The other three also covered their mouths.

"There was a plastic bag under the door. The contents had already spilled out, but when I arrived there was a strong bittersweet smell."

"Bittersweet? So it must have been cyanide," Sid said.

"Cyanide? My God!" Watson cried, waving his hands helplessly.

After ten long minutes, Hajime pronounced the cottage safe to enter. With his hands protected by ski gloves, he pulled away the remaining bits of glass in the window frame and slipped into the cottage. Shards of glass on the floor crunched beneath his feet. Sid followed, then the other three.

Snow had blown in and dusted the carpet. The heating was on, but it was just as cold inside as out.

Hajime moved gingerly around in his snow boots. There was still a trace of bittersweet smell, but not enough to make him feel ill.

"She really had a thing for that bear," Sid remarked, noticing what Patricia was holding.

"I wonder if that's all it is," Hajime muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. You see that this room was entirely sealed off. Patricia was murdered by gas, probably as you said, Sid; cyanide gas. This means that staying in your room does not guarantee that you're safe."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Agatha was almost in tears.

All Watson could do was utter strange sounds.

"What are we going to do, Hajime?" Miyuki asked.

"First of all, I want everyone to go back to the main lodge," Hajime said calmly.

"What! Are we going to wait there for days and nights without sleep until someone comes?" Sid cried, grabbing Hajime's arm.

Hajime lightly shook it off. "No. I'll solve this case. I swear on my grandfather's name."

When the three remaining online Lodge members had left for the main lodge, Hajime and Miyuki stayed behind in Patricia's cottage.

Snow was blowing in through the open window. Hajime asked Miyuki to turn on the computer.

"Why didn't you want them here when we checked Patricia's computer?" Miyuki asked.

"I didn't want them to interfere."

"But if the murderer is one of them, as you say, interfering would be tantamount to an admission of guilt."

"Sure, but the murderer is not the only one with a secret."

"You think the answer's in here?" Miyuki asked, staring at the computer.

"I think Patricia was trying to say something with those two things in her hands."

Miyuki eyed the teddy bear and the computer cord. "These tell us who the murderer is?"

"No. The door was shut, meaning Patricia did not even see her murderer. In any case, the murderer would have left quickly because of the poison gas."

"Then what was Patricia trying to say?"

"What she was about to tell us when we discovered Spenser's body."

"What's that?"

"The password to the secret document in the computer. When she was dying, she wanted to call for help, so she used the inside line to get the main lodge," Hajime said, replacing the receiver on its cradle. "I answered the phone. Patricia could do no more than utter her handle name. She knew she wouldn't live, so, like a true detective novel fan, she left a message. She wanted to leave some key information such as the murderer's name, but she didn't know it. Then, when she heard me answer the phone, she remembered the computer password she had almost told us. In other words, this," he said, pointing to the teddy bear in Patricia's hand. "By grabbing the computer cord and an item indicating the password, she tried to tell us what they had all done to deserve these deaths. She was showing us the motive for the crimes."

"Then, the password is""

"Yuta!"

The computer was now ready. Miyuki called up the secret document Patricia had mentioned and entered the password.

"Here it is."

It was a record of a secret conversation the group members had had in August the previous year. Hajime and Miyuki were shocked and angered as they read it.

"OK, the motive is clear," Hajime whispered.

"I can't believe they did such a terrible thing," Miyuki said. "Miyuki, I want to see further back."

Miyuki tried but couldn't do it.

"Then let's have a look at some of the non-secret documents."

Miyuki returned to the original screen, then tried something else. "This looks like an online conversation, too."

Hajime looked closer. "No, this is from last night. We saw it in Sojo's room. Can we go back further?"

Miyuki tapped the keyboard once more. "This is dated June last year and it's signed Sid, Patricia, and so on."

Hajime looked excited. "Miyuki, let's see more."

[The record of an online conversation]

SOJO: Next, let's discuss C. J. Nicolson's new novel. Want to give it a go?

WATSON: The important evidence is the vaccination scar on the right arm. But who would be vaccinated on their right arm?

SPENSER: Yes. Mine's on my left arm. See? Oops, I forgot you can't. Ha-ha!

PATRICIA: That's the usual spot. I was vaccinated on my left arm, too, when I was small. It hurt so much! I still have a hang-up about it. Or am I being silly? Ha-ha!

RANPO: Mine's on my left arm, too. I always wondered why they vaccinate you on your left arm.

SID: It's ~cause kids move around even if you tell them not to. If they did it on the right arm, the bleeding would never stop.

AGATHA: It depends whether you're right-handed or left-handed. In my case, I had my BCG on my right arm when I was in primary school. God, it was painful!

RANPO: Who was the jerk who tortured my sweet Agatha? Was it you, Watson?

WATSON: I was only in middle school then.

SPENSER: Ranpo, you're such an ass. Ha-ha!

They joke like this for a while, then the conversation returns to the Nicolson book.

PATRICIA: What do you think, Dr. Watson? I bet you're quiet because, like me, you haven't read the book.

WATSON: No, I read it. But I just broke my glasses so I can't see unless I stick my nose up to the screen.

AGATHA: Your eyesight's bad? What's your vision without glasses?

WATSON: 0.1. So now I'm about ten centimeters from the screen. It's so hard to type!

PATRICIA: Why don't you get contact lenses? There are disposable ones now.

SID: It pisses me off, the way they make everything disposable. All that waste!

PATRICIA: My, my, so our local punk is getting all environmentally conscious!

SID: You really are a sarcastic bitch! Are the broads in your comics like you? I bet they are. That's why your comics don't sell.

PATRICIA: They are selling these days! Oh, my bath's ready, so I'm logging off. ~Bye!

SOJO: Patricia, be sure to read the book by next time.

AGATHA: Good night, Patricia.

SID: Get yourself nice and clean, Pat babe.

WATSON: Good night, Patricia. Talk to you tomorrow.

SPENSER: Good night, Patricia.

RANPO: Good night, Patricia.

LOG IN"9X/06/14 00:50:12

LOG OUT"9X/06/14 03:35:07

You have been online for 164 minutes
55 seconds. Thank you.

"What could this mean?" Hajime asked, staring at the screen.

He thought back about all that had happened and suddenly realized the significance of a certain item found in Spenser's bag.

"Hajime, what is it?" Miyuki shook his shoulder.

"I know who the killer is. I know the false alibi the killer set up. I can also see some major mistakes that were made."

"Y-You know?"

"Yes. The mysteries are solved."

I'm so angry with myself. Why didn't I go behind Patricia's cottage and cut the line to her inside phone?

Then she couldn't have called Hajime and I could have finished the remaining two. All I had to do was pretend I had had a dose of the poison gas and was resting in my room, any excuse would

have done.

Now I must change my plan. I can't do anything if they all stick together in the lodge like this.

I'm not going to let the last two escape. I'll finish them off before Hajime and Miyuki come and then escape through the back door. Then I'll arrive at the lodge a little later, saying I had to get something from my cottage.

If I kill them all, they won't discover the motive. In any case, I have the perfect alibi.

Unless the police find some evidence, they can't arrest me.

There! I can feel it in my left pocket, the bag with the liquid. And in my right pocket, a knife.

Risky, but I'll do it. I'll find a way to mix the liquids while those two aren't looking, then hold my breath and run.

I'm taking the bag out of my pocket.

Bang! Oh, no, someone's here!

It's Hajime, followed by Miyuki.

Damn, damn, damn. I'll have to save this for later.

"Ready for the last round of the game?" Hajime asked.

"Last round? What do you mean?" Watson asked, getting up from the sofa.

Hajime didn't answer. Instead he placed a computer and plastic bag on the table.

"Hajime what are you doing?" Agatha asked anxiously.

"The case is solved. I'm going to present the proof right now."

"You mean the murderer is here?" Sid tried to get up but Hajime stopped him.

"Yes. I know who the murderer is as well as the false alibi that person set up. I also know the terrible crime the online Lodge committed seven months ago."

"What crime? I don't know what you're talking about," Watson said with a grimace and a dry laugh. He fell back onto the sofa.

"What do you mean?" Agatha asked. Her expression, too, had hardened.

"What a load of bull," Sid said, looking away from Hajime.

"You might not think you committed a crime, but you did. A human being died as a result of your actions. This is murder with a capital M."

Hajime glared at the threesome.

"I found proof of your abominable plan in Patricia's computer. Seven months ago you carried out the premeditated murder of a man named Akio Sakakibara. I remembered the name of the high school teacher who was involved in some scandal involving a student's death. The tabloids hinted that he had caused the girl's death. He wasn't charged, though, because her death was ruled as the result of an illness.

"I have no idea whether this man was guilty or not. But nobody had the right to decide he was a ~criminal' and kill him. You even had the arrogance to treat the crime as a game, because you wanted to see if you could get away with ~the perfect crime.'"

No one contradicted him. All three sat with their eyes downcast.

"Do you want a detailed commentary on what you did? It was Sojo who came up with the idea. He suggested that if the seven of you did a series of seemingly unrelated acts, you could do the perfect murder. You took several weeks to make the preparations. First, Sojo chose the place: a coffee shop with a telephone kiosk right in front of it, next to a garbage collection site.

"Then, you searched for a victim. He had to be someone who lived nearby and was either unemployed or a free-lancer, so that he could come early in the morning. It had to be someone who had committed a crime in his past but had escaped prosecution. The young man who fit your criteria was a former high school teacher named Akio Sakakibara.

"It's disgusting! You had the plan before you had the man! Like some kind of game!"

Still nobody said anything. It was impossible to tell what they felt.

"A couple of weeks before the murder, Ranpo began working part-time at this coffee shop. The night before the murder, Agatha phoned the victim, pretending to be a suicidal high school girl.

"Agatha asked the victim to come to the coffee shop where Ranpo worked. You counted on the victim showing up, for what man would leave a suicidal girl to her fate?"

Hajime flashed a look at Agatha. But her eyes were still downcast.

"In the middle of the night, Spenser scribbled graffiti on the pavement in front of the coffee shop. This was so that Ranpo could perform a certain act the next morning.

"Around the same time, Sid broke the bottom pane of glass in the kiosk in front of the coffee shop to let air in."

This time Hajime looked at Sid, but he was still looking the other way.

"The next morning, Patricia left a container still half full of bleach at the garbage site. I'm not an expert, but it seems that certain kinds of bleach and detergent emit poisonous gas when they're mixed together.

"The non-burnable garbage was due to be collected that day. It was easy to place this container on the sidewalk amid all the other garbage."

Watson had parked his bicycle nearby and was watching her. He was probably trying to figure out which one was Patricia, out of all the people who passed by and threw their garbage there."

Hajime looked at Watson. This young man, normally so quick to react when angered, was quiet, expressionless. Only his fingers, weaving frantically, betrayed his nervousness.

"When the victim arrived at the coffee shop on time, Ranpo went out to clean up the graffiti with a brush and detergent. He had bought the detergent beforehand. When mixed with Patricia's bleach, it would emit a poisonous gas.

"Akio Sakakibara, waiting in the coffee shop, received Agatha's phone call on the owner's private phone. Agatha told him, 'I can't see you yet, but I want to talk over the phone.' You bet that he would not want to talk long on the shop phone that he would want to use the one in the kiosk outside.

"Sojo had chosen this coffee shop with no public phone inside but a kiosk outside for precisely this reason. Sakakibara paid for his coffee, went outside, and called the coffee shop where Agatha was.

"Agatha kept Sakakibara on the phone as long as she could. Meanwhile, Watson came to pick up the bicycle he had left near the garbage and knocked over Patricia's bleach as he moved his bike. The spilt bleach mixed with the detergent Ranpo had left on the sidewalk and emitted the poisonous gas.

"Of course, things could have gone wrong.

Depending on the direction of the wind that day, the gas might not have gone into the kiosk. And there was no guarantee that Sakakibara would stay in the kiosk long enough. But everything went according to plan! And, according to plan, Akio Sakakibara died."

"Stop!" Sid shouted angrily, but he looked frightened. "Please stop."

Hajime ignored him.

"Your crime remained undetected and the case was closed, judged an unfortunate accident. In a way, that was natural: all Sojo did was choose the place; Spenser just scribbled graffiti, which Ranpo then erased; Sid just vandalized the phone booth; Patricia just threw away a bottle of bleach, right? All Watson did was move his bicycle, and nobody could accuse him of purposely knocking over the bleach.

"It was the same for Agatha. True, she made the phone call, but it was Sakakibara who decided to go to the kiosk to call her back. It was just a coincidence that he was in a coffee shop without a public phone and there was a kiosk just outside. It's impossible to prove an intention to kill based on these incidents.

"To top it all, none of the seven people knew one another! They had never met! What made this crime truly ~perfect' was that none of the perpetrators felt any guilt. They did not feel they had done anything criminal.

"This is the scary part. The murderers blame the murder on causes other than themselves and go on with their lives as if nothing had happened. This crime is perfect but unforgivable."

Both Agatha and Watson tried to stop Hajime.

"But," Hajime continued forcefully, "someone saw through everything and passed judgment on each of the online Lodge members the person who has committed the murders here! The Trojan Horse the murderer" is here among us!"

Chapter 6

The Truth

"H-Here?" Watson asked, his voice quivering.

"Hajime, who is it?" Miyuki asked.

"Someone who murdered four people Sojo, Ranpo, Patricia, and Spenser in a single day."

Hajime let his eyes wander for a moment before his gaze slowly fixed on the face of one person.

In those eyes, he saw a cold gleam. There was no trace of emotion on that person's face. It was like a mask.

Hajime slowly extended his hand.

"The Trojan Horse is...you, Agatha!" he cried, pointing at her.

"What?" Sid cried, instinctively drawing away from her. Watson stared at her with bloodshot eyes.

For a moment, Hajime saw a wild fury fill Agatha's eyes, only to be replaced by girlish surprise and confusion.

"What reason do I have for killing them? admit I took part in that murder with the others. But I've regretted it so much. How could I kill the four others, including Ranpo whom I'd been looking forward so much to meeting?"

There were tears in her eyes.

"You could if you were not the real Agatha," Hajime said dryly.

There was a stunned silence.

"What do you mean?" Agatha said, suddenly cold, rational.

"You are not the Agatha who took part in the murder of Akio Sakakibara."

Agatha was silent.

"That's ridiculous! You're saying Agatha isn't the Agatha we know?" Sid asked.

Hajime nodded.

"At some point, a switch was made. After all, the seven of you only know one another online and by your handles. It's easy to keep up a conversation without revealing your true identity. And the others would take it for granted they were talking to the same person all along. They wouldn't notice any small contradictions."

"You mean this Agatha is?" Watson pointed at her.

"An impostor who slipped in to take revenge."

Hajime looked at her.

"What a joke!" Agatha spat out. "You can't go around saying things based on pure guesswork. What grounds do you have for that kind of accusation!"

"I have proof," Hajime said calmly.

"I don't believe it." Agatha's voice was a whisper, but her expression had changed.

Hajime nodded to Miyuki, who turned on the computer. It soon displayed the conversation Hajime and Miyuki had seen earlier.

"Look at this," Hajime said, turning the screen toward Sid and Watson. "Remember this conversation?"

Hajime looked at each man in turn.

"Vaguely, yes." Watson said. "Yes, around summer last year. My glasses broke and I had a hard time reading the screen."

"Yes. Here's the date," Hajime said, pointing to the lower part of the screen. "June 14 last year."

"What's so special about that?" Agatha asked defiantly. "I remember that day, too. Patricia left early because she wanted to take a bath."

She scanned the screen.

"I see. How long did you talk for, Agatha?" Hajime asked.

"I don't remember," she said after a pause. "Why should I? It was more than six months ago."

Hajime slowly shook his head. "No, you don't remember because this is the first time you've seen it. This Agatha is not you. This Agatha is a member of the group, the Agatha who two months later helped in the murder of Akio Sakakibara. You changed places with her."

"Prove it!" Agatha was almost shouting.

Hajime proceeded as if ignoring her. "You said before that you had good eyesight, right? That you had 1.5 vision in both eyes."

"So?"

"And Miyuki and I saw you writing with your right hand. Here's the note you gave us."

Hajime pulled out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his ski jacket. Agatha had neatly written down a list of necessary products for online communications.

"Of course I wrote with my right hand. I'm right-handed. What's odd about that?"

"Very odd. The Agatha in the online conversation here is left-handed, and wears glasses or contact lenses."

Agatha looked dazed for a moment, then asked. "What do you mean?"

As he saw the color drain from her cheeks, Hajime grew more confident.

"Miyuki, please read the relevant parts of the conversation?" he said, pointing to the screen.

WATSON: The important evidence is the vaccination scar on the right arm. But who would be vaccinated on their right arm?

SPENSER: Yes. Mine's on my left arm. See? Oops, I forgot you can't. Ha-ha!.

PATRICIA: That's the usual spot. I was vaccinated on my left arm, too, when I was small. It hurt so much! I still have a hang-up about it. Or am I I being silly? Ha-ha!

RANPO: Mine's on my left arm, too. I always wondered why they vaccinate you on your left arm.

SID: It's 'cause kids move around even if you tell i them not to. If they did it on the right arm, the I bleeding would never stop.

AGATHA: It depends whether you're right-handed! or left-handed. In my case, I had my BCG”

"That's it, Miyuki! She's telling us she's lefthanded."

Hajime continued. "There's something odd about what Agatha says later, too." He read the text aloud himself this time.

AGATHA: Your eyesight's bad? What's your vision without glasses?

"Then, Watson, you tell her it's about 0.1. Somehow I just can't imagine someone who has good eyesight putting the question that way. I wouldn't, and I suspect you, Agatha, who have perfect 1.5 vision, wouldn't either.

"Well, you're wrong," Agatha snapped. "Both my parents wear glasses, so I am used to people talking this way!"

"Not good enough, Agatha. In any case, a bit of research will show whether you're telling the truth. They say eyesight is hereditary. I bet your parents have good eyesight."

Agatha glared at Hajime. "I'm sick of listening to your theories and of being treated like a murderer. I am Agatha and I've always been a member of the online Lodge."

But her speech had become much rougher. "You say I switched places with the real Agatha? ~What a joke! What happened to her, then?"

"She died," Hajime said swiftly.

Agatha gasped.

"You killed the real Agatha some time ago."

As Watson trembled and Sid covered his mouth with his hand in amazement, Miyuki asked, "Hajime, can that be true?"

"I'm pretty sure of it," Hajime said, staring at Agatha.

She, however, stood her ground. "More guesswork? You may be the grandson of a famous detective, but don't use me in your games. Remember I have a perfect alibi. When Sojo was killed, I was in the lounge with Ranpo."

"She's right," Watson said. "When Sojo was killed and we were called to his cottage, Ranpo told us he'd been with Agatha all the time. So it would have been impossible for Agatha to do it."

"Anything you'd like to add, Hajime Kindaichi?" Agatha asked defiantly.

"That alibi collapsed a long time ago," Hajime said.

"Wh-What do you mean?" Agatha demanded.

"Of course you killed Sojo. While you were murdering him, someone else was with Ranpo" Fumie lida, the woman who's supposed to be Spenser."

"Ridiculous! Ranpo himself said he was with Agatha!"

"Indeed he did and I was fooled. Ranpo wasn't lying, but he wasn't with you. He was with Spenser, who was pretending to be Agatha. And Ranpo believed she was Agatha."

Agatha looked tense.

"You played a superb trick with the alibis. You knew that Ranpo and the real Agatha were on

very friendly terms, and you decided to take advantage of this. Spenser was probably the one who gave you the opportunity. Spenser was supposed to be Ranpo's bosom buddy, right, Watson?"

"Yes, something like that," Sid answered awkwardly.

"But, in fact, Spenser was a woman. Her feelings toward Ranpo were probably more romantic than friendly. This is pure conjecture, but I believe Spenser started falling in love with Ranpo while playing the role of his buddy online.

"She must have panicked, however, when you all decided to meet in person. You can change your name and background but not your sex. She must have been torn between having her secret exposed and wanting to meet Ranpo at least once.

"She decided, via the network, to confide in you, Agatha. Or maybe she intended to ask you to change handle names just while the party lasted, because she knew Ranpo was interested in Agatha.

"You made the most of this opportunity. You probably told her that you were doing the same thing that Agatha was really a man. Of course, in the murder of Sakakibara, Agatha's voice had played a key role, but that was easy to explain away. You probably told Spenser you got someone else to make that phone call. You happily agreed to change places with Spenser.

"You told Spenser to come late that first evening so as to have some time alone with Ranpo. Citing the same reason, pretending to be Agatha, you told Ranpo to come late, too. Last night, when we were all returning to our cottages, you said you'd remain in the main lodge and wait for Ranpo. Then you hid somewhere in the lodge and waited for Spenser and Ranpo to show up."

Hajime waited for Agatha to defend herself, but she remained silent. Hajime felt she was marshaling all her energy to look for a weak point in his theory.

"Spenser and Ranpo showed up at the times you'd told them, never suspecting they were about to be killed and thus provide you with an alibi. Spenser arrived first, then Ranpo, and just as you had envisioned, they were thrilled with each other.

"Ranpo thought he was talking to Agatha, and we thought you were Agatha. This gave you the perfect alibi.

"Meanwhile, you got your first victim Sojo. You caught him, as you had foreseen, having an

online chat with the other three. This was perfect; you knew that the log-out time on his computer would strengthen your alibi.

"After you had killed Sojo, you made sure his computer was left on, and his curtains were open and the key left in the door. You wanted to make it easier for us to look inside. Then you returned to the main lodge to see what Ranpo and Spenser were doing.

"As you'd hoped, they were still together. You waited until your alibi was solid, then made sure Ranpo and Spenser left for their cottages.

"I suspect you pretended to be Patricia the only other woman and telephoned the lodge to tell Ranpo and Spenser to return to their cottages. I remember Ranpo showed up with Watson at Sojo's cottage, trying to convince us he had an alibi because he had been with Agatha in the main lodge until 1:30 A.M., which is when he claimed Patricia called.

"But when I talked to Patricia this morning, she swore she'd never made the call. You must have made it in order to get Spenser and Ranpo away from each other."

Hajime looked at Agatha, but she showed no sign of crumbling. He knew she felt confident that she had left no incriminating evidence. He did have one trump card left, but he was saving it.

"After your phone call, Ranpo and Spenser returned to their cottages," Hajime continued, choosing his words carefully. "It was at this moment that you got ready to commit your second murder; Spenser's."

"You mean Spenser was killed so early on?" Sid asked.

"Yes," Hajime said with a nod. "Agatha used Spenser to give her an alibi. Once that was done, she wanted to get rid of Spenser as soon as possible.

"Think about it. Spenser showed up late pretending to be Agatha. If Spenser should decide suddenly to call one of the others, the inconsistencies would be revealed and probably the exchange of handle names, too."

"But, Hajime, why did the murderer bother to bury Spenser's body in the snow? I mean, the other bodies weren't hidden?" Watson asked, with a sideways glance at Agatha.

"The murderer wanted to delay the discovery of Spenser's body as long as possible so as to postpone the revelation that Spenser was a woman." Hajime said. "Ranpo was killed right after telling everyone of Agatha's alibi. If the body of a woman was discovered soon after, the murderer feared someone might guess there'd been a switch of handles."

"If you buried a body any old way in this kind of weather, the snow would soon hide all traces of it. At the earliest, the body would be discovered by the police when they searched the area; at the latest it would not be discovered until spring when the snow melts."

"By then, Miyuki and I are the only people alive would tell the police about Agatha's alibi. After all, we have Ranpo's statement that he was with her. Even if the body were discovered at this point, it would be practically impossible to detect the little tricks that were played."

"That, at least, is what the murderer hoped. But, as luck would have it, we discovered the body immediately."

Hajime looked again at Agatha. This time her eyes burned with anger.

"What imagination!" she said. "But a detective novel buff like me can see all sorts of little things that don't work, don't you agree, Watson?"

Watson just hung his head like a classroom dunce.

Agatha looked fed up. "So you all want to make me the murderer. OK, I'll have to defend myself. First, nobody could have made Ranpo say what he did, even if, as you say, he was with Spenser, not me. Hajime, you're simply looking at results and basing your guesses on them."

"Second, you say Spenser and I exchanged names solely because you know Spenser was a woman. How do you know that Spenser was in love with Ranpo? That's pure conjecture."

"Third and most important you have no evidence for anything. Nobody would read a detective novel you wrote, with such flimsy proof."

She spoke rapidly and forcefully. Nothing remained of the reserved high school girl.

She was the Trojan Horse, capable of committing cold-blooded murder. When he saw her true colors, Hajime thought it was time to play his trump card.

"So you're at a loss for words?" Agatha asked with a twisted smile.

"Not at all," Hajime answered, smiling.

"It was not by chance that Ranpo said he was with Agatha. You managed to manipulate him into saying it."

"Wh-What?"

"After you killed and buried Spenser, you immediately called Watson, Ranpo, Miyuki, and myself. You used the party toy to change your voice and you informed us that Sojo had been killed.

"We gathered at Sojo's cottage, just as you wanted, and discovered his body. Naturally we all remembered our phone calls and discovered that each of us had heard something different. You told Miyuki and I that either Watson or Ranpo had killed Sojo. And what were you told, Watson?"

Watson flinched. "That Ranpo had killed Sojo. And Ranpo heard that..."

"That you had killed Sojo, right?" Hajime asked.

"Yes," Watson replied.

"Don't you think it's strange?" Hajime said, turning once more to Agatha. "Why did the murderer bother to do all this? Actually, why did the murderer declare himself or herself to be the Trojan Horse and phone to announce the crime? Because the murderer wanted each of us to confirm one another's alibi.

"This group is called the online Lodge; its members are lovers of crime fiction. So if someone uses a party toy to change his or her voice and claims to be the Trojan Horse, saying there's been a murder, you immediately think it's some kind of sideshow. I certainly did.

"But this was exactly what the murderer wanted us to think! Although Miyuki and I are probably

the only ones who felt uneasy, it was precisely because we thought it was some kind of game that, without calling the others being the middle of the night also had something to do with it; we rushed out to Sojo's cottage. Perfectly normal behavior, up to this point.

"Yet when we saw the body through the window, we froze. I was astounded that a murder had actually taken place in this isolated mountain lodge. True, I am used to murders, but I wouldn't have the guts to step in just with Miyuki. But Watson and Ranpo were there, too, and that changed things.

"Call it group psychology or whatever, the four of us found the courage to enter the cottage, I imagine we were chosen because the murderer counted on our acting this way.

"You even took pains to open the curtains and keep the door ajar to make it appear as if the murderer had fled, right, Agatha?"

She didn't reply, and Hajime understood her silence as an admission.

"The four of us immediately noticed that Sojo's computer was still on. We noticed, too, that the log-out time would correspond to the time of murder. This was what the murderer wanted.

"Now we feel very uneasy about the phone call from the Trojan Horse. Watson, you were deeply affected by what you heard and said Ranpo was the murderer, right?"

"Yes," Watson said nervously. "The Trojan Horse said Ranpo had killed Sojo. I assumed the Trojan Horse was someone in our group who used this name and voice because he or she did not want to be identified."

Hajime nodded. "Ranpo probably thought the same thing. As a result you started arguing, each accusing the other of being the murderer.

"But Watson, you were chatting online with Patricia and Sid at the time of the murder. You presented that as an alibi. Then, of course, Ranpo also claimed to have an alibi. After all he was with Spenser-as-Agatha all the time. He said that he was with Agatha and that if I didn't believe him, I could call her and ask.

"I immediately called Agatha. You, Agatha, acted so shocked by what had happened and confirmed that you had been with Ranpo. In this way, you had a perfect alibi.

"We all thought we were acting of our own accord when, in fact, we were all doing exactly what you wanted us to do. When I was little, my grandfather told me about a technique called '~forcing' that magicians use. It involves making members of the audience select the cards you, the magician, want them to select. You did exactly that!"

He was pointing at Agatha. Her expression had not changed, but there was a woodenness about her folded arms and her hands were trembling.

"You must have been waiting anxiously for Ranpo's call. Even if Ranpo hadn't suggested calling you to confirm his statement, you would have been told and asked to join the others because a murder had taken place.

"You asked to speak to Ranpo so I gave him the phone. If I remember correctly, the phone conversation went something like this: 'Ranpo here.' Pause. '~Are you OK? Sorry to disturb you so late.'" Pause again. '~See you later then. 'Bye.' Then he hung up."

Everyone, except Agatha, gave a murmur of amazement at Hajime's memory.

"The pauses indicate your speech, Agatha. Let's focus on two things: first, Ranpo's words, '~Are you OK? Maybe Ranpo noticed that Agatha's voice sounded different, then realizing she must have been asleep, he apologized. Or maybe you had foreseen this and said something like, '~Sorry, I was asleep and my throat's dry.'

"Of course, Ranpo had not spent very much time with Spenser-as-Agatha. It would be practically impossible for him to realize that the voice he heard over the phone was not the woman he had met, but you didn't want to take any chances.

"The second thing we must focus on is Ranpo's, '~See you later then.'" After he hung up, we decided to gather in the main lodge. The last thing you wanted was for us to gather in Sojo's cottage, the scene of the murder. Ranpo thought Spenser was Agatha, so at all costs you had to avoid meeting Ranpo in our presence.

You had to change the meeting place to the ~ main lodge so as to have a chance to finish Ranpo off.

"Maybe when Ranpo answered, '~See you later then,' you said something like: '~I don't want to .

go to the scene of the crime. It's too scary. Why don't we meet in the main lodge?

"Well, Agatha, am I right?"

Agatha opened her eyes wide. Hajime knew he'd hit the mark.

"You probably acted the part of a quiet, defenceless high school girl to prepare for this. You may have been a little different from the online character, but the same is true of the others.

"E-mail can be compared to a rapid exchange of letters, so it's hard to see someone's character clearly. In fact, it's more natural for there to be a slight discrepancy between the real character and the e-mail one.

"Anyway, you managed to get everyone to move to the main lodge. By asking Ranpo to contact the others, you had him stay longer at the murder scene. You waited for him to come out of the cottage and you killed him."

"What a joker you are!" Agatha cried. "I certainly did not kill Ranpo. I wouldn't kill him. I'd been looking forward to meeting him for so long! Anyway, what about his dying words, ~Pa"tri'? Patricia was the murderer! She killed the three of them, then she killed herself! That way everything makes sense!"

"Patricia had no motive for killing those three or for committing suicide," Hajime said.

"Then what was he trying to say?" Agatha glared.

"He said ~Patricia.""

"Then why're we having this discussion?"

"Because Patricia's not the murderer. Ranpo thought you were Patricia when you were killing him."

"What are you saying?"

"Look, seven people were supposed to come here: Sojo, Ranpo, Watson, Sid, Patricia, Agatha, and Spenser; four men and three women. But Ranpo thought Spenser was a man. In other words, he assumed it would be a party of five men and two women.

"You are the woman he has never met" show up and stab him. On his last breath he realized the murderer was one of the two women. Not Agatha, whom he had just spent time with, but Patricia."

Sid and Watson inched gingerly away from Agatha.

Hajime knew it was time to play his trump card. He gave Miyuki the sign and she slipped out of the lounge.

"Wh-What are you doing now?" Agatha demanded. She tried to follow Miyuki, but Hajime blocked her way.

"I haven't finished yet. If you leave now, we'll assume you're admitting your guilt."

"Where's your proof?" Agatha screamed hysterically. "How dare you treat me like a murderer without producing any proof! Proof, I say, proof, proof!"

"Calm down," Hajime said. "I'll give you proof."

Hajime pulled out a red muffler from the plastic bag on the table. It was the hand-knitted one Ranpo had been wearing.

Hajime held up the muffler, stained dark with Ranpo's blood. "You know what this is, right?"

"Ranpo's muffler. What about it?" Agatha asked, but her voice was quaking.

"Remember what you said to me after the first murder, when I went with Sid and Watson to look for Ranpo. You said, ~Ranpo is tall and he's wearing a red muffler." The more I thought about your words, the stranger it seemed. Unlike us, who had seen Ranpo at Sojo's cottage, you couldn't have known Ranpo was wearing a red muffler. Even if you had met Ranpo at the main lodge instead of Spenser, he told us he'd left Agatha and returned to his cottage before coming to Sojo's. But you had to have seen him in person to know he had on that muffler."

"When I first met Ranpo here, he was wearing a muffler so I must have remembered that. "

"That's what I thought at first. I didn't really doubt you. But looking back, I suspect it was a psychological slip you made because you were desperate to keep the truth from us. By showing us you knew what Ranpo was wearing, you wanted to emphasize that you had been with him. But that forced you to mention something that you were not supposed to know. I wish I'd realized then that you were the murderer! I could at least have saved Patricia!

"You're not making any sense!"

"You knew Ranpo was wearing a red muffler because he was wearing it when you stabbed him."

"Stop! This is nothing, it isn't proof!

"Then answer me this: Did you give Ranpo this muffler?"

"No, why would I give him that?" Agatha said, then she bit her lip as if she realized she'd said the wrong thing.

"Then who among the nine of us gave it to him?"

"What do you mean?" Agatha asked. "It's hand-knitted, so I suppose someone gave it to him, so what?" Her voice lacked conviction.

"I don't think he arrived wearing this muffler. Ranpo was coming to meet Agatha, who is his romantic interest, even though it's only online. So naturally he wouldn't wear a muffler knitted by someone else. Even if his mother knitted it or he'd bought it somewhere, he wouldn't wear something that might cause jealousy."

"That's just your opinion!"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then who gave it to him?"

"Spenser did. Pretending to be Agatha, she gave it to Ranpo while you were killing Sojo."

"No," Agatha said, smiling.

"No?"

"I gave it to him."

"What?"

"I'm so sorry," Agatha said, changing her tone. "I lied. I gave this muffler to Ranpo. Only I couldn't say it because he was killed right after, and the muffler got all bloody. You know?"

"So you say you knitted it?"

"Yes," Agatha said, confident again.

"OK, Miyuki!" Hajime shouted.

The door opened. "Here it is," Miyuki said, dragging in Spenser's overnight bag.

Hajime rummaged inside and pulled out a plastic case. He opened the lid. "Look."

Everyone peered inside.

Hajime lifted out two red balls of wool, about the size of mandarin oranges.

"Wool left over from Ranpo's muffler."

Agatha closed her eyes.

"She probably wanted to finish it in time for the party and was knitting in the train. Knitting needles, too! A police check will show that the wool matches Ranpo's muffler. 'm sure it will serve as conclusive evidence. It is also on record that you said you knitted the muffler."

Everyone looked at Agatha.

A myriad of emotions were going through each of the five individuals in the lounge.

Agatha gave a deep sigh. "You win," she said.

"You really are quite a kid," Agatha said.

"It was touch and go for a while, " he answered. "I was lucky."

"Don't be modest. It's amazing how you described my actions yesterday."

"Was I accurate?"

"Oh, yes. A few details here and there, but otherwise perfect. Of course, I did sense you were baiting me by going on and on like that. Still, when you reproduced that conversation with Ranpo, it was as if you'd tapped the phones. I knew it was a performance, but I couldn't help being stunned you could do that on pure conjecture""

"No, not pure conjecture. I was convinced you were the murderer so I logically proceeded from that conclusion."

"When were you sure it was me?" Agatha smoothed her bedraggled hair.

"When I noticed the contradictions in that conversation on Patricia's computer. When I realized there was another Agatha, I knew there had to be another person around. But you did strike me as odd from the beginning."

"Odd?"

"For example, Ranpo's reaction when he heard I was Kosuke Kindaichi's grandson. He acted as if it was news to him. Odd, right? I mean it seems that would be the first thing Agatha would have told Ranpo. But Ranpo knew nothing about me. He didn't because he had been with Spenser, who had never met me."

"I see. I didn't think that far ahead."

"I was also bothered by the fact that you never brought up the subject of the muffler, although you would be the only person to give it to him. The muffler you had supposedly knitted was all bloody and wrapped around the neck of a dead ody. If you had really given it to him, you would not have been able to conceal your distress."

"I suppose so. I only glimpsed it in the blizzard and didn't notice it was hand-knitted. I remembered it being a gaudy red thing. If I had noticed it was hand-knitted, I might have guessed that Spenser had given it to him. Really, the Trojan Horse concedes total defeat," Agatha said with a little laugh.

"Agatha, did you really kill those four people?" Watson asked.

Agatha looked at him with a cold hatred in her eyes. "Yes, I killed them. I killed the real Agatha, too."

Watson, looking like a bedraggled dog, backed away.

"Wh-What's your connection with Akio Sakakibara?" Sid asked timidly. He was admitting his own guilt.

"You want to know?"

Agatha looked down, laced her fingers together, then forced the ring off her right hand. She gently placed it on the ring finger of her left hand.

The ring had seemed a little tight but was now a perfect fit.

"I was engaged to him," she said, her face still expressionless.

"We met when I was still at school and he was starting out as a teacher," Agatha began. "I was a mess: stealing, fighting, prostitution, drugs; you name it, I did it. I wasn't afraid of anything and wanted to sink as low as I could.

"Akio apparently took it on himself to reform me. He was always lecturing me. I couldn't get him off my back! The last thing I wanted was to obey the teacher! When I got into trouble for smoking, I handed in a note saying I was dropping out. I didn't even tell my parents. I ran away from home and started working at a bar.

"A few weeks later, Akio, God knows why he moved into the apartment next to me. I couldn't believe it! He would stick things like the high school exam brochure in my mailbox so I could take the college entrance exams, and lecture me when I came home late, as though he was my father or something. One day he even invited himself into my apartment and started tutoring me!"

Some color returned to Agatha's cheeks, as if these memories made her feel human again. She looked into the distance and gave a little smile.

"I actually started looking forward to seeing him. I never had that kind of attention before. My parents had always been a mess: my mother and her lovers, my father with his work and women. It was the pits, they just left me to the maid and we hardly had any meals together. One day I found I was in love with Akio. But he was such a square, such a nerd! He kept saying, 'You're my student.' In the end he got me into a national university.

"It was Akio who taught me how to use a computer. Thanks to my computer skills, I was able to pay my way through college. Akio persisted in seeing me just as his student, but I didn't mind. I was perfectly happy, having him listen to me sometimes and going to his place now and then to cook him dinner. But it didn't last three years. One of his students died of a brain hemorrhage after he slapped her."

Agatha's happy expression clouded over.

"I said to him, 'It's not your fault!'" And it's true, isn't it? The police concluded that the death was the result of illness. But he didn't listen.

"What troubled him most was that the school hushed up the incident so he escaped almost all criticism from the mass media. In his mind, this made him the worst kind of teacher. His life fell apart when he stopped teaching. Every night I could hear him next door, crying and groaning. Once

he got drunk and fell asleep on a park bench and almost froze to death. He was a wreck, body and soul, and so was I."

Pain shot across Agatha's face, but immediately gave way to that familiar, impassive expression.

"Then around the end of summer, both of you must remember it as well as I---"

She flung a glance as sharp as the knife she was holding at Sid and Watson. The two young men looked hurriedly away. Agatha gave a thin smile.

"It was a hot and humid night, hard to sleep. Akio rang my doorbell. It was the middle of the night, but I leaped out of bed. It was the first time Akio had come to my apartment in several months. He laughed when he saw me open the door in my T-shirt and underpants. I hugged him and cried my eyes out. He hugged me, too, and...kissed me. Come to think of it, that was the first time and the last.

"He said to me, 'I've sorted things out. I'm going to see what I can contribute to the future, rather than be tortured with regret for the past.'"

"The phone call from the suicidal girl had triggered this. He was so excited, saying, 'I'm going to see her tomorrow morning and convince her to live.' Then he gave me this, saying, 'I bought this a long time ago.'"

She held up her left hand and looked at the ruby ring lovingly. It flared red, reflecting the flames from the fireplace.

"It was the happiest night of my life. I didn't realize that hell was right around the corner."

She opened her eyes wide, and they, too, seemed to reflect the flames and burn red. A wild hatred gleamed in them.

"The next morning, I was waiting for Akio in his apartment when the police called to say he was dead. I rushed to where he was murdered. It wasn't far, but they'd taken him away ages ago. All that was there was a white chalk circle in the telephone kiosk where the body had been. I just crouched down and shivered; I felt ill.

"His parents were dead, he had no next of kin" so, as his girlfriend, I received all his belongings. The police had decided from the start that it was an accident, so they didn't conduct a proper investigation. Then I discovered a paper napkin in the pocket of the jacket he was wearing when he died. There was a telephone number on it.

"I decided to find this girl and convince her to live because he could no longer do it. I, too, assumed his death had been an accident. I dialed the number on the napkin, it was that of a nearby coffee shop. Explaining the situation, I asked the owner to tell me about the high school girl who had received a call on the pink pay phone that day.

"I was shocked to learn that the student had been taking notes as she talked. On top of that, she was wearing the uniform of the school where Akio had taught.

"It just didn't make sense. What girl trying to commit suicide would seek help from a teacher with a reputation for physical abuse? I smelled foul play. Was Akio's death really the result of a series of coincidences?

"I went to the coffee shop in front of that telephone kiosk. I wanted to talk to the part-time waiter who had used the detergent that had been one cause of the accident; but I was told he had quit soon after. The waiter had only worked for two weeks. I tried to get his telephone number, but the owner wouldn't give it to me.

"I grew more suspicious. Why had the boy worked for only two weeks? Why had the suicidal girl taken notes? To report to someone! About what?

"Based on what I knew of the girl, left-handed (she had been seen writing with her left hand), chubby, and wearing glasses; I set out to find her. I knew she was a student at my old school, so I went to my freshman homeroom teacher and asked him to show me the student album. He was such a fool! His manner changed as soon as he found out I was enrolled in a topflight national university.

"I selected some candidates, took some photographs, and showed them to the coffee shop owner. He had no problem picking out the girl. Then I began following her for some days.

"I learned she was a regular at a computer store. I used this as a way to strike up a friendship, saying I worked with computers, and one day I lured her into my apartment.

"She had her defenses down because I was a woman. When I pointed a knife at her, she started crying. I tied her up and asked her about her connection with Akio. She told me everything, how the

members of the online Lodge had killed him.

"I suppressed my anger and learned her computer password. There and then I logged onto her computer and, using the name ~Agatha,' confirmed what she had told me by chatting with the others.

"Now I was sure. When I confronted her, the real Agatha", she said, "But all I did was call him up and arrange to talk to him. That's not murder, s it?"

"When I heard that, something flashed in my mind: all the online Lodge members probably felt the same way! They didn't have a jot of remorse! What did she mean by ~All 1 did..."? He died and I was desperately unhappy because of these idiots, yet they thought no more of the act than if they had squashed an insect! In fact, they were not even really aware they'd murdered him. Something in me snapped. Even now I don't quite remember what I did.

"When 1 came to myself, I saw that girl" Agatha slumped lifeless in front of me. I had a terrible headache and was drenched in sweat.

"There was a new feeling inside me; something like a lump of ice. The game of revenge had begun. In the bathroom I cut up Agatha's body into pieces. As I did that, I felt I was metamorphosing into something inhuman, something intelligent but inorganic and malignant" like the computer virus, the Trojan Horse.

"I rented a car and carried Agatha's body in plastic bags weighted with stones to the pond in a nearby park. I knew the body would eventually be found, but I didn't care."

Tears were pouring down her cheeks, but she made no attempt to wipe them away. She continued.

"Then I arrived at this lodge pretending to be Agatha. It was easy!"

Agatha stuffed her hands into her pockets and started moving slowly toward the door. Hajime had a nasty premonition and his heart beat faster. His eyes were riveted on those pockets.

Suddenly she whirled around and from her pocket pulled a plastic bag, filled with liquid, and aknife.

"Don't move!" she screamed.

"What the hell are you planning to do?" Sid screamed back, trying to get near her.

Agatha waved the knife at him.

"Don't get any closer or you'll smell cyanide gas. One whiff and you're dead."

"Put those away." Hajime took a step forward.

"I told you not to come near me!" Agatha screamed, her face streaming with tears. "You two," she yelled at Sid and Watson. The two stiffened. "How can you understand his suffering or mine, you who kill someone as if it were a game? Who do you think you are, calling yourselves ~Sid' and ~Watson'? Stuck in a world of virtual reality or whatever, living in a world of lies and pretending you're friends. You murdered a human being the most important human being in my life!

"You had no idea what kind of person he was and how much he suffered after that incident with his student. But you just decided he was some kind of rat! When he died, some tabloids called it ~the judgment of the gods," but what does that mean? There are millions of people who are far worse.

"You killed him as if he were a game character. So I'm going to eliminate you in the same way."

Hajime felt there was something final in her tone. He said a silent prayer and stepped toward her. "You don't want to kill any more. We all know now how you've suffered, all of us, including Akio. It's all over now..."

"N-No, it's not over, not yet," Agatha with a muffled sob, shaking her head.

"You're wrong. Look at those two," Hajime said, pointing at the quivering Sid and Watson. "They must be filled with so much remorse that they can hardly bear to live. Now they know the result of their horrendous acts. So you must""

"No! Don't come near me!" Agatha shrank away from Hajime and grabbed the door handle. "I'm

sorry, Hajime and Miyuki," she added, "that you got involved, but I have to do this and you can't stop me. I can never forgive them, and I must kill them even if I have to die myself."

The knife's blade touched the bag.

"Stop!" Hajime shouted as loudly as he could.

"That's enough," a gruff voice said, and Agatha was seized by the arms.

"Inspector Kenmochi!" Hajime cried.

"Nice to see you, again, Hajime. That was close," Kenmochi grinned, showing some nicotine-stained teeth.

"Inspector, what are you doing here?"

"I knew I couldn't take any vacation after those body parts were found in the pond. So I decided to take a day off and see how you were doing. I found my brother all worried because you two had gone off to a lodge on the other side of the mountain and hadn't come back. When I couldn't get through on the phone, I knew something was up. So I got the local police to drive me here in a snowmobile."

Kenmochi gave Agatha's arms a strong squeeze. With a little cry, she dropped the knife and bag.

The inspector pushed Agatha toward Hajime and slowly came into the lounge.

"Are you all right, Inspector?" Two uniformed policemen had come in, too. Without turning around, Kenmochi signalled them to pick up the potential murder weapons.

Hajime flopped to the floor in relief. "Just how long were you out there?" he asked.

"I got here a few moments ago. I looked in the window, sensed something wrong, and eavesdropped for a bit. You owe me!" he said with a guffaw.

"I almost had heart failure," Hajime said, exchanging looks with Miyuki, who had also sunk to the floor.

"I'm booking you for attempted murder," Kenmochi said to Agatha.

Agatha fell to the floor, sobbing. Sid and Watson watched her. They did not look particularly relieved; in fact, they were very pale and looked ten years older to Hajime.

Agatha's was bawling like a baby, but her cries seemed to be of someone who had rediscovered her humanity.

"Looks like it'll stop snowing," Kenmochi said, looking outside.

The wind had dropped and a very light snow was falling.

Hajime went to the window. It was still light. Only this morning the landscape had seemed as moribund as a desert. Everything had taken place just in one night and day. The long nightmare was Over now.

"The weather report is wrong," Hajime said, looking at Miyuki.

Miyuki, still sitting on the floor, looked up and forced a smile. "I suppose we can ski tomorrow."

"You really do have your priorities set," Hajime sighed, scratching his head.

Epilogue

Kenmochi had called for some police cars, and these were now lined up in front of Silver-wood Lodge.

"Local police! I said two and they send five," Kenmochi said, throwing his cigarette onto the snow.

"So what're we going to do now?" Hajime asked. "The routine investigation of the murder scene?"

"No, I have to head back and file a report. The guys are going to be flabbergasted when they hear I've found the suspect in the Tokyo park murder out here in the boondocks." Kenmochi looked depressed. "It looks as if another case has to be reopened."

He looked at Sid and Watson. They had not yet been charged but were under surveillance.

"Then no skiing after all? I was looking forward to skiing with you, Inspector," Miyuki said.

"Afraid so. The champion of justice has no luck when it comes to leisure." Kenmochi's regret seemed slightly tinged with pride.

"Inspector!" called the officer leading Agatha to the police car.

"Shall we go?" Kenmochi laid his hands on Hajime and Miyuki's shoulders.

"Wait!" someone yelled. "Please, wait!"

Sid ran up to the police car. An officer tried to stop him, but Kenmochi waved him away.

Sid clung to the car, panting. "Please open the window. I want to talk to her."

"Open the window, Officer," Kenmochi ordered the driver.

Sid clung to the window frame. "I'll turn myself in. I know you'll never forgive me, but I want to say I'm sorry I murdered your fiancée. That's the least I can do, standing in front of you as my true self."

Tears poured down Sid's cheeks. A glimmer of warmth, of humanity, returned to Agatha's eyes. "What's your name?" she finally asked, her voice breaking.

"Junya Yoshiyuki."

"I see."

She looked away from him and said, "My name is Yuri Takuma."

"Yuri, please forgive me, I beg you!", Takuma's expression softened imperceptibly.

"I'll think about it. Officer, could you close the window?"

At a nod from Kenmochi, the officer closed it.

The four-wheel-drive police car moved slowly across the snow. Yoshiyuki stood transfixed until it vanished into the distance.

"Hey, you!" Kenmochi gave the stunned and immobile Watson a light thump on the shoulder.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Oh, uh, Kenichi Izumi."

"Cool name! You should take better care of it."

"I'm sorry..." Izumi hung his head.

Yoshiyuki was back. A middle-aged plain-clothes policeman approached the two young men and said, "You two are coming with us as well. The inspector says he has a lot of things to ask you."

They obeyed without a word.

"Maybe we should be moving, too," Hajime said, yawning and stretching.

"I suppose so," Miyuki replied, also yawning. Even Kenmochi let out a bearlike yawn. "OK, we'd better get in the car. Wait, I had something to ask you two." Kenmochi said. "How on earth did you end up staying in a God-forsaken mountain lodge like this?"

"Well, Inspector, Hajime suggested we try something other than the regular slope," Miyuki responded, eyeing Hajime. "And we ended up getting lost."

Kenmochi snorted. "Meaning the tour course on Shikagoe Ridge? It's forbidden to ski there at this time of year."

"I knew it!" Miyuki squealed. "Hajime, you're so hopeless!"

"I bet you were trying to impress her without doing your homework!"

"Shut up!" Hajime retorted. "Of course I knew that."

"Hajime, just what do you mean by that?" Miyuki demanded.

"Yes, just what do you mean by that?" Kenmochi echoed.

"Well, it's a long story," Hajime said, trying to laugh it off.

"What were you up to? Tell," Kenmochi demanded, locking his arm around Hajime's neck.

"Lemme go, you strangler! Officer! Help!"

"Oh, Hajime, you've turned bright red!" Miyuki pointed at him, and her laughter echoed among the mountains as dusk fell. It had stopped snowing.

"Furthermore, one of the surviving members of the group confessed that the group, including Miss A, 18, identified as the victim of the Kaminoi murder, was heavily involved in the "accidental" death of a former teacher in Tokyo.

"Last year, in a telephone kiosk in the Kitaizu-micho district of Kokubunji, Tokyo,..."